

**A CRITICAL STUDY  
OF  
THE RELIGIOUS PHILOSOPHY  
OF THE  
MEETEIS BEFORE THE ADVENT OF  
VAISNAVISM IN MANIPUR**



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OF  
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THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE GAUHATI UNIVERSITY  
FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF  
PHILOSOPHY

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**"IN  
MEMORY OF  
AND  
DEDICATION TO  
THE DIVINE ANCESTORS  
AND  
THE GREAT MAICHOU SEERS  
OF  
THE MEETEI COMMUNITY."**



This is to certify that this research work under the title '**A Critical Study of the Religious Philosophy of the Meeteis before the Advent of Vaisnavism in Manipur**' has been carried on by **Shri L. Bhagyachandra Singh** under my guidance and supervision. He has fulfilled all the requirements under the Ph.D. regulations

The thesis is the result of his own investigation and no part of the thesis was submitted to any other University for any research degree.

**D.K. Chakravarty,**

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of Philosophy  
Gauhati University**





## PREFACE

The present work proposes to make a systematic, constructive and critical study of the religious philosophy of the Meeteis of Manipur. Hinduism is of comparatively recent introduction in this land. The Meeteis have adopted the tenets of Chaitanyante Vaisnavism but they retain many characteristics inherited from their prehistoric ancestors. It is believed by many Western and Indian scholars that before the advent of Hinduism, the Meeteis were animists. The aim of the thesis is to reject this view and show how the ancient Meetei seers developed a full-fledged religious philosophy.

The Meeteis had a script of their own. They had religious texts (puyas) composed by the wise men of the land. During the reign of Pamheiba (1709-1748), when Vaisnavism became the official religion of the state, ancient Meetei script was replaced by Behgai script and many sacred manuscripts concerning the old faith were destroyed. Our study of the traditional religion of the Manipuris is based on those ancient texts which are available today. Some of them are in the archaic script, while others are rendered into modern Manipuri. Mention may be made in this connection of the royal chronicles, the Cheitharol Kumbaba. This book traces the history of the Meeteis from A.D. 33 up to modern times. A second set of chronicles, the Ningthourol Lambuba, contains many aetiological legends and supplements the Cheitharol Kumbaba at various points. There is, however, little documentary evidence for some beliefs and practices and consequently information concerning them is collected from marbas and maibis, the priests and priestesses of the traditional religion.

The thesis is divided into nine chapters. The introductory chapter deals with the evolution of ancient Meetei society and examines the different theories of the origin of the Meeteis. Chapter II describes the nature and function of the various deities (lai), rejects the naturalistic interpretation of the Meetei pantheon and exhibits the monotheistic tendency in the ancient faith. The Meetei thinkers were not unmindful of the philosophical problems of the origin

and development of the world Chapter III deals with the theory of 'creation of the world as described in different puyas. In chapter IV an attempt is made to reconstruct the image of man as revealed in the religion of the Meeteis Chapter V brings out the significance of different traditional festivals of the Meeteis and special attention is paid to the Lai Haraoba which has produced one of the most beautiful schools of religious dancing in the world Chapter VI describes the various rites associated with the indigenous faith and indicates the moral and religious beliefs of the people Chapter VII turns to the ethics of the Meeteis and examines their belief in the divine law in the preservation of order in nature as well as in moral life of man. In chapter VIII an attempt is made to show the transition from the traditional faith to Vaisnavism In this connection parallels are drawn at so many points between Hinduism and the Meetei Religion. The conclusion puts in a nutshell the results of the discussion.

I undertook the study under the able guidance of Dr. D K. Chakravarty, Reader in Philosophy, Gauhati University and without his guidance it would not have been possible to complete the work within the stipulated time. I also place on record my gratitude to Shri O. Bhogeshar Singh and Shri M. Narendra Singh for their suggestions and help in my study of archaic Meetei language. I am indebted to Shri Yumnamcha Tamphajao and Maibi Amusana Devi who have encouraged me in all respects. Further I would fail in my duty if I do not express my gratitude to local associations and institutions whose publications on different aspects of the Meetei life, culture and philosophy have been used in course of the work In this connection I must mention Manaba Marup, Universal Literary Association and Cultural Intergration Conference etc. I am also grateful to Shri Bhaben Das who was very kind to type the theais within a very short time even in the face of his other urgent pre-occupations

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## FOREWORD

Dr Bhagavan Das, the eminent Savant of India was inclined to agree with Cramb in this statement that "India is religion" Manipur, to my mind, is no exception to this and about the contributions of the different parts of India Bhagavan Das had these things to say . "Bengal has given us the Chaitanya movement as also the later Tantras Assam has similarly given us the pure Vaisnavism of Sankaradeva and, in earlier times, the magico-religious cults of the Tantrikas" (The cultural Heritage of India Vol IV Introduction). My own findings in the exploration of the earlier phase of Manipuri Culture confirm increasingly the fact that Manipur is a land of the Tantras in its higher and lower forms, having possible links with Tibet and Bhutan and even parts of southern China. It had an earlier form of Saiva religion, followed by the worship of Mother Goddess (called Lemarel in Manipuri) and Naga cult As a matter of fact, the eastern India, associated with Kaul tradition of Matsyendra-nath and Golakhnath, belongs to the Tantric belt (An expression of Dr S.B. Das Gupta) and contributed the Agama tradition known as Muni vati cult, as against the Rishi cult of the vedic Aryans. Hinduism is supposed to have come, in the opinion of Dr S K. Chatterji as early as 500 A D , if not earlier, to Manipur, one of the gateways to China and other parts of Central Asia in the pre-historic period The Mongoloid or the Kirata component of Manipuri culture is quite obvious in the earlier phase of its culture This view finds support also in the findings of Dr B-K Kakati when he says, "Saivism in some gross form with wine and flesh was the prevailing religion of the aboriginal Kiratas" ( The Mother Goddess Kamakhya, P 17 ) Manipur was noted for sorcery and other practices of lower Tantricism. It was also a centre (Tantric Pitha) of pilgrimage

Historically speaking, Vaishnavite Bhakti started entering Manipur since the 15th Century A.D. and pervaded the land from the 18th Century onwards, resulting in a cultural

renaissance in the reign of Rajarshi Bhagyachandra (1763-1798) in the form of Rasleela and Sankirtana. This represents the period of synthesis of the old and the new faiths, harmonisation of diverse trends in the culture, which continues to this day. Vaishnavism came to stay to fulfill and to be reborn in the artistic soil of the land. We now have a rich literary heritage of Purano-Tantric phase of Indian culture, wherein some of the local deities like Atiya Guru Shidaba, Sanamahī, Pakhangba and Lemarel stand out clearly with Vedic-Tantric connotations. Significance is superimposed on the original names of the deities, in the context of the prevailing Hindu tradition, more particularly, the Purano-Tantric tradition.

In this book, Dr. Bhagyachandra adopts an alternative approach to the exploration of ancient Manipuri culture. He struggles, intensely and with considerable competence, to project the religion and philosophy of the ancient Manipuris (or Meeteis) from the Manipuri point of view, as if "the ancient Meiteis" developed a full-fledged religious philosophy. His pains-taking research into the various aspects of Manipuri religion and philosophy (divided into 9 chapters) is based on this assumption. He refuses to accept the proposition that interactions between the old faith and the Hindu faith took place in the pre-historic or proto historic period of the civilization of this land. It also appears that the type of the research undertaken by the Manipuri scholars like Pandit Raja Atombapu Sharma from the vedic point of view is a little farfetched and suffers from too much of an Aryan hypothesis. He is also not prepared to accept the anthropological approach of British Officers, stating that the ancient Manipuri religion was only animistic and nothing else. Dr. Bhagyachandra is proud of the fact that the ancient Meiteis had a high sense of religion which passed into philosophy, as reflected in many old manuscripts (called Puyas), relating to the cosmology and theology of the old beliefs. His remarkable indepth studies of the rites and

festivals of the Manipuris is indeed illuminating. One must be fascinated by his pains-taking labour in discovering the significance of the life-style of the old Meiteis. His identification of Sanamahı and Pakhangba with the transcendental and dynamic aspect of the Brahman, much, in tune with the vedantic philosophy creates an impression of high Scholarship. While agreeing that there is much in common between the Meiteis and the surrounding hill tribes in the matter of their cultural expression, he is shy of approximating the old faith to the tribal way of life. The ethical and even the philosophical dimension of the ancient Manipuri faith is evidently beyond the grasp of the aboriginals nor he is prepared to accept the Hindu superimposition as Hinduism came to his mind, very much later to Manipur, by only about 15th Century A D.

I am fascinated by his discovery of the old faith of the Meiteis, as expressed in the various manuscripts and existing life style of the people, having considerable affinities with the Hindu, more particularly with the Purano-Tantric faith and practice. The only difference is that he considers all these as interesting parallels or coincidental references having nothing to do with the basic structure of the old Meitei religion and philosophy which is self-sufficient and which is also universal in outlook. He takes pride, with sufficient justification, in the wisdom of the ancient Meiteis and accepts also the later Vaishnavic synthesis of the old and the new faiths. He is proud of Rasleela and also of the old Lar-Haraoba.

The beauty of this book lies in its examination of the various alternative stand points and interpretations provided by the British and local Scholars and refutation of these views with skill and competence. Here he deserves sympathy and praise. The charm lies in his scholarly interpretations and a struggle for objective assessment and splendid marshalling of the various data in order to support his conclusion. Perhaps the process of search is more important than the conclusion. It is the sincere and authentic journey that

matters. I have not the least doubt that a careful perusal of this scholarly work would be quite a rewarding experience to the scholars and laymen alike. It is also possible that no scholar has said the last word on this issue and that the learned author might undertake further adventure in this uncharted sea.

**E. Nilakanta Singh**

## **A Word from the Author**

I feel it to be my bounden duty to express my deep sense of gratitude to the authority of the Gauhati University who have kindly accorded permission to publish my doctoral thesis. I still owe my reverence and gratitude to Dr D K Chakravarty of the Department of Philosophy, Gauhati University, under whose able guidance and supervision, I have carried out my research and investigation into the vast complicated hidden mass of native concepts of religion and philosophy. In the present work I have made a maiden approach to present the native view of God, World and Man in a systematic manner from the native's own point of view, a kind not ever attempted by any scholar, local or outside. I am also grateful to Shri E Nilakanta Singh, a learned scholar, who inspite of his deep feeling of an increasing confirmation about Manipur as a land of Tantras, being intensely based on Purano-Tantric culture of the hindus, has kindly written a foreword to the present work. Despite the difference in the approach, he is fascinated by the discovery of the old faith of the Meiteis in this work as expressed in various manuscripts and existing life style of the people. He has given his opinion that a careful perusal of this work would be quite a rewarding experience to the scholars and the laymen alike in the field of religion and philosophy of the Meeteis/Meiteis constituted by the seven primary units, called yeks/salais.

Shri E Nilakanta Singh's own stand of Purano-Tantric feature of the native culture appears to be quite in keeping with the general trend of Indian scholars who are habituated in looking upon the non-aryan mongoloids of north east India from a vedic aryan elevation. He might have drawn this conclusion in view of the native traditional beliefs and practices in the appeasement and control of the world of evils with which the common people are very much associated. This is common in every human culture. Mankind in the world belonging to different great religions (Hinduism, Christianity, Islamism, etc ) used to give cultural expression

connected with their lower strata of life and society which appeared to be contrary to the high ideals cherished in their great culture. In fact a community's culture has a composite character of both higher and lower aspects. In the case of this community also, besides the lower aspects, it has the brighter side giving expression to the higher intellectual and spiritual values of life and the society. They have their own conception of the universe, man and God. They take the whole universe with all its contents, the things and beings, even including mankind to be manifestation of the One and only One supreme God, the Tengbanba Mapu, the Nong in His divine eternal expression as supremely vast infinite expanse filled with intense darkness. The whole mass of ancient creation deities and other deities of populace, called the Umang Lais (that include ancestral, tutelary, domestic and public deities even the supreme human personalities of the later ages who have been deified by virtue of their supreme divine nature efficiency and dispositions) are taken to be manifestations and shifting forms of the One God—the one supreme ultimate principle of existence. The One He manifested into the Many and in and through the Many, the One realises Himself. The supreme unity is realised in the diversity. The one uniform expression of their different puyas, the sacred texts, is that the whole universe is but a divinely ordered scheme for His self realisation through the universe which is His manifestation. Shri Nilakanta Singh, despite his deep scholarship, however, disowns this rich intellectual and spiritual treasure of his forefathers. This may perhaps be due to his hindu oriented thinking in lower tantric order. His inclination towards hindu purano-tantric cult is but misleading and arbitrary.

Indeed this community had been long under sufferance since the beginning of the 18th century due to the terrible process of forcible hinduisation decreed by their monarch Pamheiba through the instigation of one Brahman priest Shantidas Gosai from Sylhet. By a royal decree the books and records in the native scripts were banned. The king



forcibly collected all the puyas and ancestral records, and burnt them at Kangla (this fateful event is still reckoned as as Puya Meithaba—the burning of the puyas) Maichous who were in possession of the ancient texts went to remote areas of the hills and the valley to keep their treasure concealed. Bengali script was introduced in place of the native one. Anybody who resisted the great onslaught of forcible hinduisation was severely punished. As T.C. Hodson rightly remarked, 'Religious dissent was treated with the same ruthless severity as was meted out to political opponents and wholesale banishments and execution drove the people into acceptance of the tenets of hinduism'. Horrible pollutions and changes had been introduced in the life and society of these people through manipulations, orientations and super-impositions. The original yek/salai syetem which is the basic foundation of the social structure of this community had been manipulated into hindu gotra system, each yek being identified with a particular hindu gotra. Hindu calendar was introduced side by side with native Thapalon (system of counting months). There was demolition of temples of native deities, and attempts were made to replace the native deities by hindu gods and goddesses. By a royal decree bones of the dead forefathers were exhumed and the whole collection was thrown into the Ningthi river of the present Burma. The traditional burial system of disposing the dead was disallowed and cremation was made the customary method. Many traditional native ritualistic performances and religious events have been reoriented in hindu style and manner. The names of kings right from Nongtalai down to Charairongba, Pamheiba's father have been sanskritised. The name of the country and that of the people got changed into Manipuri, and Manipuris respectively. Their native way of life even including deiting habit had been reoriented into hindu style and manner. Nothing of native past could get free expression in original order. These repressive measures kept this community under sufferance since the forcible conversion. The

manipulations, reorientations and super impositions in the life of this community are but attempts to extinguish the inner vitality of the community's life and establish a firm hindu orientation. Such a tune became little low and compromising when both the king and people fell victim of the invading Burmese forces, and have to fight against a common enemy. Thus in the time of King Chingthang Khomba ( Bhagyachandra ) there had emerged an atmosphere of an emotional compromise between the king who was advocating hindu-vaishnavism and the people who were resisting the onslaught of hinduisation. As a consequence hindu vaishnavism of the order of Bhagyachandra could somehow thrive in the native soil, side by side with the inherent native beliefs and practices, in a restricted degree. In their outward life people began to give the best expression as hindus while they retain in the inner core of their life and society the inherent native beliefs and practices of their forefathers. The same person has a dual spiritual impression one of hindu vaisnavism and the other of inherent native faith. The Raslila of hindu-vaisnavism has got an artistic foundation of the native culture while in the native religious festival of Lai-haraoba there came to pass unholy infiltrations of hindu hymns like, Hari Ho Narayan, Rama Krishna Narayan. Afterwards, even this emotional compromise became so unholy that it has given birth to all the identity problems of this community regarding script, name of the community and the name of the land and the bonafide character of the ancient texts etc. Thus Neither hindu-vaisnavism could get the entire hold of the community's spiritual being nor the inherent native faith in their blood could find a free expression. Now as the free wind of secularism blows consequent upon the merger of this land into the Indian union in 1949, a strong wave of revivalism of the traditional faith in its full fledged character comes. As a member of this community I have the humble wishes for the revivalist wind to get the right demension in the perspective of religious unity of all mankind in the world.

To day in the midst of the confusing and confounding character of the identity problems of this community, the comparatively clear issue is their yek/salai institution. At least this is undisputed that this community has a structural social foundation of seven primary constituent units called yeks/salais viz , Mangang, Luwang, Khuman, Angom, Moirang, Kha nganba and Sarang-leisangthem. An individual belonging to any one of the units is a bonafide member of this community. But here also the problem arises as to whether the name of this community of the seven yeks/salais should be Meetei/Meitei or Manipuri. In fact the use of the word Manipuri being the name of this community had been only after the forcible conversion and before that it was Meetei/Meitei. The Royal Chronicle Chertharol Kumbaba clearly bears evidence to this fact. It writes that upto the time of Charairongba, father of Pamheiba (Garibniwaz) all the kings right from Nongtalai were addressed not as Raja but as Meidingu/Meitingu or Meeteingu which means the Lord or Master of the Meeteis/Meiteis. As the actual use in official capacity had been replaced by the word Manipuri, the problem further arises as to what might have been the correct one between the two terms, Meetei and Meitei as the name of this community. This issue now becomes so tight and tensed that even in the same family there is division —someone supporting Meetei and still others advocating Meitei with sufficient logic of their own which can hardly be denied.

Notwithstanding the difference in spelling and pronunciation, the two words Mee and Mei have the same significance and meaning as mankind. Mee represents mankind who had been created by God in His own image, called Mi in the native language. Mei, again means the Tail or Terminal end, called Mamei in the native language, of God's creation. Mei also means Fire in this language, which is but the symbol of God, the author of creation, from whom mankind had descended. The suffix Tei of both

the terms Mee and Mei is derived from Atei (meaning Other), or from Tai or Tainaba (meaning connecting or joining), or from Teitharakpa (meaning descent). Taking into consideration the whole meaning of the words Mee and Mei along with their suffix Tei, they have the same implication as meaning mankind who is other than God who creates him and the lower creatures who are devoid of spirituality (intelligence and self consciousness), a special prerogative of man. It may also mean mankind who descended from God, the author of creation, to serve as the connecting mean between God and His creation. According to the native view God fulfils His supreme purpose of realising Himself in His own creation (the manifestations) through Man with whom has been endowed the spiritual qualities of intelligence and self-consciousness. Thus the two terms Meetei and Meitei, despite their apparent difference, have the same inner significance. Rather, it may be so also that one term might have been corrupted from the other through long suspension of official use as replaced by the word Manipuri. As this has been my firm observation that these two terms Meetei and Meitei have the same significance and use to mean Mankind with the solid foundation of seven primary constituent units, called yek/salais, I do not hesitate to use either term as the name of this community. To me every Meetei is a Meitei, every Meitei is a Meetei.

These were the sufference of the people of this community since the day when Hinduism has set its foot in this land forcibly through the iron protection of the kings. For the determined courage and will of my community in preserving the inherent native way of life, beliefs and practices in the composite culture and national psyche of the community, I humbly express my deep sence of humility.

As I have said earlier, this present work is a pioneering venture aiming at a systematic projection of the native traditional religion and philosophy, particularly from the native angle. I admit, quite naturally, this work would suffer in

many details I seek an earnest apology for that To improve and set the venture in a right perspective is a task for all of us in this community

I still owe a number of thanks and gratefulness to many friends and elders of this community and the different local organisations whose inspirations, suggestions and contributions have enabled me to get through the hardships of making out this thesis

To the readers I have a special apology for the many omissions and commissions in this book in spelling and punctuations due to poor proof reading of the press and myself Some photo blocks in the original thesis are also not given here due to non-availability of the photo blocks in time These will be given in the next impression For the great service of my friend, T Ibohal, M Sc Senior Lecturer (Selection Grade), Department of Chemistry, Imphal College, also the proprietor of the Paradise Press, with his press staff, in printing this present work, I express my indebtedness

With a deep sense of humility and gratitude to the divine ancestors and the great Maichou seers of this community who left this rich treasure for the future generation I humbly bow down my head to their feet and dedicate the work in their ever green memory

I pray to the Supreme Almighty Father, the Tengpanba Mapu to grace the men of my community to see the rich spiritual and intellectual values of this community in their right perspective, and contribute works that would throw sufficient light in the perspective of the fundamental unity of all religions of mankind all over the world from the viewpoint of the Meeteis/Mentels which generally means mankind all over Malel (the world of ancient native conception)



# CONTENTS

	<i>Pages</i>
PREFACE	(vii)
FOREWORD by E Nilakanta Singh	(ix)
A WORD FROM THE AUTHOR	(xii)
Chapter I      INTRODUCTION	1
Chapter II     . GODS	25
Chapter III   . WORLD	58
Chapter IV     MAN	75
Chapter V     . FESTIVALS	91
Chapter VI    : RITES	113
Chapter VII   . THE ETHICS OF THE MEETEIS	129
Chapter VIII   HINDUISM AND THE MEETEI	
RELIGION	148
Chapter IX    : CONCLUSION	163
GLOSSARY OF MEETEI TERMS	167
BIBLIOGRAPHY	172
APPENDIX (List of figures and drawings appended)	
1    A VIEW OF MEETEI RESIDENTAL PREMISES	181
2.   PAFAL INDICATING KANGLEI PUBA	
PAKHANGBA ( Meetei National Emblem )	182
3.   TWO PAFALS—ONE INDICATING TILLIKOK-	
TONG SITAPA PAKHANGBA	
( Immortal Essence ) OTHER,	
GENERAL PAFAL AND	
PALLANDABI FIGURE.	183





## CHAPTER—1

### INTRODUCTION

The present Manipur, a state of India in its north-eastern corner, lies between latitude 23 50 (N) and 25 40(N), and longitude 93 10 (E) and 94 30 (E) It has a total area of about 8628 sq miles Of this a span of about 700 sq miles forms the broad valley which is surrounded on all sides by columns of lofty hills

This small plain is the homeland of the Meeteis. They have seven primary constituent units called yeks or salais. They are Mangang, Luwang, Khuman, Angom, Moirang, Kha-Nganba and Sarang-Leisangthem There are also many immigrants in this valley. Both in the pre-historic days and in the later ages people from outside come to this land for permanent settlement Earlier, immigrants excluding those who remain still as Loi population<sup>1</sup> in the remote areas of the valley were integrated into the Meetei community and assigned to one or other of the yeks Subsequent immigrants—mainly Brahmins<sup>2</sup> were in general assimilation but were not assigned to any yek They remain as priests of Hindu

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**1. Loi Population** — *The ancient Chakpa immigrants who did not mix up with the original population and who settled at the remote areas of the valley near the foot-hills, such as Sekmai, Fayeng, Koutruk, Khurkhul, Leimram, Andro, etc constitute the Loi population To these Chakpas later are added those Meeteis who refused to accept Hinduism imposed on the people by King Pamheiba in the beginning of the 18th century A D The exiles of the state also, during the time of the kings, joined the Loi population.*

**2. Mauipuri Brahmins** — *A small group of the Brahmins came to this land in the middle of the 15th century A D during king Kyamba's time. Till the time of king Charairongba their number was small In the reign of Pamheiba and afterwards they came in large number (Bamon Khunthoklon).*

religion in Manipur. The Muslim population consisted mostly of captives during the reign of King Khagemba. Afterwards some Muslims came to this land and settled here permanently. Since the Muslims are mostly from Bengal they are called Pangals (corrupted use of the word Bengal).<sup>1</sup> Like the Brahmins, these Muslims also were not assigned to any Meetei yek, though they lived with the original population in the valley since the time they came to this land. In the hills that surround the valley, there are different tribes - the leading ones being the Kabuis of the north-west and west, the Maos and Marams of the north, the Tangkhuls of the north-east and the east, the Murrings of the south-east and the central hills, the Anan Nangfous, Taraos, Moyons, Mousangs and Lamkangs of the south and the south-east, the Thadous, Kukies and Paites of the south and the south west. Besides, there are other hill tribes such as Koms, Chothes, Koirangs, Cheerus, etc.

These two groups of people, the Meeteis in the plain and the different tribes in the surrounding hills, had been living together in this small country as brothers since time immemorial. The very close relation between them is a fundamental point for study in tracing their origin.

The present state of Manipur has as its boundary, the state of Nagaland in the north, Cachar district of Assam in the west, some portion of the present Mizoram in the south-west, while in the south and the east it has common frontier with Burma. The neighbours call this land differently, "The Burmese call it Kathe, the Assamese Mekle, while, according to Colonel McCulloch, the Bengali name for the State is Moglai"<sup>2</sup>

1. Pangals — *The Meeteis called the Muslims Pangals as they came from Bengal. Most of them were deserters of Mughal Army. They came here as invaders in favour of prince Sanongba, brother of the then king Khagemba. But they were defeated at the hands of the Meeteis. As captives they settled here (Pangal-Khunthoklon)*

2. Hodson, T C, *The Meiteis*, p. 1, and also Brown, R, *Statistical Account of Manipur* p. 2

The names of the land in the *early chaks*<sup>1</sup>, according to the puyas ( ancient written records ) and the traditional legends were Tillikoktong Ahanba in Hayi Chak, Mira-Pongthoklam in Haya Chak, Hanna Semba Konna Loiba in Khunung Chak and Muwapali Mayai Sumtongpan in early Konna ( Langba ) Chak. In the later ages of Konna (Langba) chak, it was popularly known as Kanglei-Pungmayol, Kangleipak and Meitrapak. R Brown writes, "the name for the Manipur valley recognised amongst the Manipuris themselves is Maithi Leipak, or the country of the Maithis " <sup>2</sup> In no known time of the land and its people these words Maithi and Maithi leipak were found in use except in the writings of Atombapu Sharma <sup>3</sup> This might be corrupted expression of the words by Britishers who are not familiar with the native pronunciation.

But without any reference to these earlier names, and also to the currently used word Meitei, the land has now come to be known as Manipur This change of name

1 **Early Chaks** — *The Meeteis believed in two great Time Orders: Hangkos and Chaks , the former is the divine age which man can only imagine, the latter is the age of the human beings The Chaks are four in number , Hayi, Haya, Khunung und Konna ( Langba ) Hayi, Haya and Khunung are early chaks*

2 Brown, R., *Statistical Account of Manipur*, p. 4

3 Sharma, A , *Meitei Kirtan*, p 124 Here Shri Sharma refers to the words Mithi and Meithai. Mithi was a group of Kshatriyas who migrated to this land in the ancient days, according to Sharma. Meithai means the Mithis who came over to this land for permanent settlement and used to burn the dead instead of burying, and from this burning of the dead which the Meeteis call in their language Meithaba, the word Meithai comes, according to Sharma.

is but an obvious repudiation of its ancient tradition. This is clear from the writings of Hodson and Brown. R. Brown writes, "the name Manipur is thus accounted for by the Manipuris, who quote the Mahabharat in confirmation of its accuracy they say - the name is from mani, a Jewel, this jewel was formerly in possession of the rajas of the country ages ages ago. The country was at one time named Mahendrapur or Mahendrapahar (the name of a high hill situated but a short distance to the east of the capital), but on a raja, by name Babra Baha, coming into possession of the jewel, which formerly belonged to a Nag Raja or Serpent King, and the gadi, he changed the name to Manipur" <sup>1</sup>. Quite a similar passage is found in T C Hodson regarding the change of the name of the land and its people <sup>2</sup>. These British writers however, take these views to be resting on very slender foundation. Their impression was that these ideas grew only when the people became Hindus at the beginning of the 18th century A D. Till the end of the 17th century in the Royal Chronicle Cheitharol Kumbaba the word 'Manipur' was never used <sup>3</sup>.

To trace the origin of a group of people living in a secluded place of the world for centuries is really a difficult task. The main sources available for the purpose are the ancient traditional legends, cultural life and social beliefs, the puyas or the written accounts handed down to posterity by the forefathers of these people. Besides, the present Manipuris (who now call themselves Hindus) and the Manipuri Brahmans (the priests of the Hindu religion as followed in Manipur) also have their accounts of Indo-Aryan descent. Whatever may be the basis of their accounts, it is worthwhile to have a careful look into these accounts to ascertain the origin of these people in this land. Further (though Hinduism has kept them apart) the close relation between the people in the plain and those in the hills surrounding

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1. Brown, R, *Statistical Account of Mampur*, p 2

2. Hodson T C. *The Meitheids*, p 7

3. cf. *Khelchandra Cheitharol Kumbaba*.

the Valley, cannot be ignored in a sincere attempt to trace their origin. The Britishers' accounts regarding this land and its people though written at a time when Hinduism was at its zenith in this land, are highly illuminating and provide us with gems of valuable information.

Thus three views can be observed broadly in this regard : (a) the view of the Brahmins, (b) the views and surmises of the British writers on the issue and (c) the view as held by the people themselves following their forefather's tradition, culture and social beliefs.

The people of this land known as the Meeteis were converted into Hinduism late in the beginning of the 18th century A.D. during the reign of King Pamheiba. As T.C. Hodson writes, 'To the royal will of Pamheiba, the monarch in whose reign of the fortunes of the state reached their zenith. Hinduism owes its present position as the official religion of the state. At first the decrees of the king received but little obedience and the opposition to the change centered mainly round numerous members of the royal family who were supported, not unnaturally by the Maibas, the priests of the older religion. Religious dissent was treated with the same ruthless severity as was meted out to political opponents, and wholesale banishments and execution drove the people into acceptance of the tenets of Hinduism.'<sup>1</sup> This clearly shows that Hinduism was forced on the people of this land by their king. After this forcible conversion, in due course, the Brahmins, the priests of the new religion, started enunciating the theory of Indo-Aryan Descent as they got full and blind support of their followers, the Manipuri Hindus, under the royal patronage. Thus the land was given new name, Manipur. In support of their theory they used to refer to the Mahabharata, the great Hindu Epic. Their main plea was that Arjuna, the great Pandava hero, married Chitrangada, the princess of Manipur while in his sojourn in

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1. Hodson, T.C., *The Meithei*, p. 95

this land as part of his pilgrimage towards the east near the sea-shore. There Arjuna left a son named Babru Bahan by Chitrangada. The Manipuris are none but the descendants of Arjuna, the Aryan hero, and hence they are Aryans, they claim. But, here also, simply from a man's coming to this land and leaving behind a son, the conclusion, that all the people in this land should be taken to be Aryans, is unwarranted. In his book 'The Meitheids' Hodson writes, "By the end of the Dapar Jug and the beginning of the Kali Jug (year 3435), Enoog Haoba Chanoo, the wife of Babroobahan gave birth to a son called Pakhangba. He use to assume the form of gods by day, and by the night he used to be a man"<sup>1</sup> He further says that around the personage of Pakhangba legends have grown up which declare him to have had the power of changing his shape into that of a snake, and his death, which alone proved his being a human being was due to the accidental infliction of a wound by his son, who saw his father in the house at night and killed him unwittingly with a spear. Hodson reports other versions of the origin of Ningthouja or royal clan. From one of the versions he takes the following genealogy "The Brahma Deva (the creating God of the Universe) had sprung out from the naval lotus of Narayan ( the protecting God of the Universe ), Marichi Muni ( a Hindu sage ) was born from the limbs of Brahma deva. Marichi's son Surja (sun) , Surja's son, Shaborna Muni ; Shaborna's son Indoo Muni , Indu Muni's son Chitraketu , Chitraketu's son Chitradhaja. Chitradhaja's son Chitrabiya , Chitrabiya's son Chitra Sarba , Chitra Sarba's son Chitra Rat , Chitra Rat's son Chitra Vanoo, Chitra Vanoo had no son, only a daughter named Chitrangada ; Chitrangada's son Babrubahan , Babrubahan's son Sooprabahu , Sooprabahu's son Pakhangba (Jobista). The Jobista or Pakhangba was the first ruling king of Manipur."<sup>2</sup> but here he observes that such tales are obviously tainted

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1. *Ibid* , p. 5 , 2. *Ibid*.

by the influence of Hinduism, and the appearance of non-Hindu names seems to mark the beginning of native legend.<sup>1</sup> R. Brown while referring to the denial by the Manipuri elite of their origin from the hill tribes surrounding the valley, quoted the view of the Manipuri Hindus thus, "They state that they always belonged to the valley and have always been a separate race, and Hindus. They account for their origin thus, and quote the Mahabharata in support of their statement. When the five brothers (Pandavas) were expelled by Raja Duryodhan from Hastina (Delhi), they in their wanderings, came to this part of the country, and one of them, the second brother, Bhima, married Hirambei at Kachar, and had a son named Gututh Kutcha, whose descendants called Bhimaputras, are still living in Kachar. The third brother, Arjuna entered Manipur, and subsequently married Chitrangada, daughter of the Raja of the country, and had a son named Babra Bahaa, who came in possession of the gadi. Since the accession of Babra Bahaa, they assert they have been Hindus. They also state that as the appearances of the Bhimaputras now living in the Kachar district are alike to theirs, they have no hesitation in drawing the conclusion that they are descended from the "Pandavs,""

Among modern writers Shri Atombapu Sharma, with his voluminous publications, advocates a new theory of the Indo-Aryan origin of the Meeteis. According to him the Meeteis are none but the Mithis who migrated to this land at a time when Hinduism even was not in its present form. The Mithis<sup>2</sup> he said, were Kshatriyas (Vedic Aryans) who

1. *Ibid*

2. Brown, R. *Statistical Account of Manipur*, p. 57

3. The Mithis, as Atompapu Sharma mentioned in his *Meitei Kirtan*, are a group of Kshatriyas, who are descendants of the person who came out from the dead body of king Nimi who died due to a curse given by sage Vas'ista. This person's name was Mithil, the man who came from dead body and his descendants were known as Mithis. *Meitei Kirtan*, pp. 122-124.

used to go with their Purohita in search of a place in the east for their permanent settlement. In their onward journey towards the east they found Sadnira ( Kartoya ) river which they could not cross. They settled there for some time and the place was then called Mithila ( the land of the Mithis ). Afterwards they started their move towards the east crossing the Sadnira river. When their leader asked the God of Fire as to what would be the place for their settlement, he was told that it should be *Prachin Bhawan*. The Mithis thus moved towards the east to reach Prachin Bhawan, which is but, Yumphal ( Imphal the capital of this land ). After travelling for a pretty long time towards the east facing number of hardships, they entered Yumphal through Ngaprum Chingjeng. On their way to Yumphal they settled for sometime at Koutruk. During their stay at Koutruk they made the Chakpas look after the Fire they brought all along their long journey for their sacred worship and use. ( This Fire is still today preserved by the chakpas at Andro, Sharma claims, as *Poireitongi Khunthokmei* <sup>1</sup>. Then as the Mithis permanently settled in this land the land came to be known as Mithilpat, the land of the Mithis. From this Mithilpat came Meethei leipak and then Meitei Leipak. This is the Indo-Aryan Account as given by Shri Atombapu Sharma. The migration of the Mithis to this land occurred in the eighth century B C <sup>2</sup>. Shri Sharma supports his theory by referring to Cheitharol Kumbaba ( Royal Chronicle ). Nongtalai Pakhangba, the first king in the historic age, was requested by his wife Laisna to enable her to assume the form of god by day and human being by night. Pakhangba told her that she could not do so as she was one who migrated with Poireiton. What Sharma intends to point out here, is that, though there had been the original population, there

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1 *Poireitongi Khunthokmei* means the fire associated with Poireiton at the time of migration. Shri Sharma's view is different from the traditional view as revealed in *Poireiton Khunthok*.

2 Sharma, A, *Meitei Kirtan* P, 157



was migration of people from outside in the ancient days. The original people looked at the migrated people ~~little~~ differently. In support of his theory he further refers to the death ritual of the Mithis, the migrated people, who used to burn the dead instead of burying. This burning ritual of the dead, he points out, is purely of Indo-Aryan origin brought to this land by the Aryan immigrants. In Meetei-lon, the word 'burning' means Meithaba (Mei=Fire, Thaba=Burn). From this Meithaba of the dead there came the word 'Meithai' which ultimately became the word Meitei, which is the name of the people of this land. As the people have come to be known as the Meiteis, their land also came to be known as Meitei Leipak.

In support of his theory Shri Sharma further draws a number of parallels between Meetei and Vedic culture. He goes even to the extent of claiming that the Vedas began in Manipur. From his writings it is evident that he seeks to give an Indo-Aryan colouring to every place, event and cultural tradition of this land. Some of the glaring instances for this are given below :

Shri Sharma says that the religion of the early Manipuris was Krishna Yajur Veda. They followed Gabamayan Yagya. This is evident from their traditional belief in the immortal Guru (Guru Sidaba). Guru assuming the form of dead bull, floated down the great river of the land to test the intelligence of his sons. Of his sons the youngest one could recognise the dead bull to be the Guru. Guru blessed him for his intelligence and gave the title Pakhangba. The dead bull was then divided into seven parts, as instructed by the Guru, and distributed among seven groups of people. This became the origin of the seven yeks or salais of the Meetei Khunai. This division into seven yeks is just a counterpart of the Gotra system of the Vedic Aryan.<sup>1</sup> Another instance is that of Pratnouks of the Rg. Veda. He says that this *Pratnouks*, is *Prachin Bhawan* which is but Yumphal, the

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1. *Ibid.*, p. 137

first dwelling place of the Meeties<sup>1</sup>. Still another reference is to the Supreme Deity Sanamahı of the Meeteis. According to him Sanamahı is but Syon Mahya (Garuda) of the Vedas and Puranas of the Vedic Aryans<sup>2</sup>

Besides, Shri Sharma gives an Indo-Aryan colouring to the important places, events and personalities of the Meeteis. Even the kings are given Sanskrit names. Some of the instances are given below :

Meetei name		Sanskrit name
Kongba Maru	=	Gaybı Ganga
Nungjeng Pukhrı	=	Bindu Sarobar
Laitang Lairam	=	Bhardwas Tirtha
Pumlen	=	Poulamma Tirtha
Sekmai Turel	=	Soubhadra Tirtha
Karang Chinglak	=	Karam Dham
Moirang Turel	=	Agasta Tirtha
Hiyangthang Ching	=	Sthirachal giri
Nongmaiching	=	Udayachal giri
Chingoi Turel	=	Baruni Nadi
Mongbahanba Umang	=	Bakdanda ban
Koubru Ching	=	Koumar Prabat
Irıl Nadi	=	Ira Nadi
Turel Achouba	=	Bijaya Nadi
Loktak	=	Lakshibın
Karang Ching	=	Karang giri
Moirang	=	Mahirangapur
Lamangdong	=	Bishenpur
Nongpok Ningthou	=	Indra
Marjing	=	Kuber
Wangbren	=	Yama

1. *Ibid.* p 109. *Pratnouks* = *Pratna* ( *Prachin* ) + *OKs* ( *Bhawan* ) = *Prachin Bhawan* , *Yumphal* = *Yum* ( *Bhawan* or *OKs* ) + *Ahanba* ( *Pratna* or *prachin* ) = the first dwelling place of the human beings.

2. *Ibid.* , p. 111.

Meetei name		Sanskrit name
Khorifaba	=	Barun
Irum Ningthou	=	Agni
Thangjing	=	Asinikumar
Chungkhei Ningthou	=	Mahadeva
Loyarakpa	=	Bayu deva
Taoroinai Pakhangba	=	Nagraj Ananta
Heibokchung	=	Bhangnesore giri.

In his book Pakhangba, Shri Sharma gives Sanskrit names to all kings from Nongtalai Pakhangba downwards. But this is in fact contray to what has been written in the Royal chronicle, Cheitharol Kumbaba. Only from king Pamheiba in whose reign there had been the forcible conversion of the Meeteis into Hinduism, the Meetei kings had been given Hindu names. Before that there were no kings having Sanskrit names<sup>1</sup>. No Sanskrit names of the land are publicly known anywhere still today.

This Indo-Aryan Account as given by Sharma has been assessed by Dr Saroj Nalini Parratt thus. "the most remarkable claim for Aryan (Vedic) origin for the Meeteis may be found in the voluminous writings of Atombapu Sharma. While one may admire this writer's deep knowledge of Sanskrit, his attempt to draw parallels, at so many points between the Meeteis and Vedic culture (even to the extent of claiming that the Vedas began in Manipur) is too much like special pleading to be convincing"<sup>2</sup> At any rate the account of Sharma has got its own shortcomings. His is a purely Hindu oriented account to the utter ignorance of ancient tradition, culture and the puyas of the people of this land.

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1. *Cheitharol Kumbaba*, p. 60. R K. Sanahal also followed Sharma in ascribing Sanskrit names to the places, gods, kings and events of this land. As there is no public notice of such things, they remain in the books of these writers only. See his 'Satjal'.
  2. Parratt, S.N., *The Religion of Manipur*, p. 2,

Not only Shri Sharma, other Manipuris like Yumjao Singh and Ibungohal Singh also wrote as if the Meeteis had an Indo-Aryan origin, following the tradition of the Brahmins.<sup>1</sup>

British writers particularly, Hodson, Brown, Pemberton and McCulloch did not accept the Indo-Aryan Theory of the origin of the people in this land. They used to make their own observation on the issue, giving due regard to the age old tradition, culture, way of life, physical structure and the food habits etc of the people in this land. The social background of the people (even though it has been transformed to a great extent by the new religion, i.e., Hinduism) stands as a refutation of the theory of Indo-Aryan descent of the Meeteis.

T C Hodson began with the report of the genealogy of Ningthouja (ruling) clan as given by the Manipuri Brahmins. Then immediately he stated that such tales were obviously tainted by the influence of Hinduism, and the appearance of non-Hindu names seemed to mark the beginning of the native legend.<sup>2</sup> To him the claim of the Manipuris for a Hindu Descent is quite untenable, and rests upon a very slender foundation. In view of the composite character of the languages spoken by the different tribes, their common appearance and structure, tradition and culture Hodson was in favour of regarding the Manipuris to be descendants of the surrounding hill tribes. He observed, "Tradition brings the Moirang tribe from the South, the direction of the Kookies, the Koomul from the East, the direction of the Murrings, and the Meitheis and Looang from the North-West, the direction of the Koupooees. The languages of the Murrings, Kookies, and Koupooees are all very similar, and as the Koomul, etc., the offshoots of these tribes were, as before said, at different periods the dominant tribes in the

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1 Cf Singh, Yumjao, *An Early History of Manipur*, and Singh, Ibungohal, *Introduction to Manipur*.

2. Hudson, T C., *The Meitheis*, P 5.

valley, it might be expected that the present language of the people united under the name of Meithei, would have a very apparent likeness to these languages, and such is the case. All these tribes have also traditions amongst themselves that the Munniporees are offshoots from them. These traditions then, and the composite nature of the language, appear to me to afford more reason for supposing the Munniporees to be descended from the surrounding hill tribes than from a Tartar Colony from China ”<sup>1</sup>

T.C. Hodson's stimulating reflection about the descent of the plain people from the surrounding hills runs thus :

“This careful opinion drew the consent of Dr. Brown, who adorned it with some interesting speculations. Should it be a correct view that the valley of Munnipore was at no very distant period almost covered entirely by water, the origin of the Munnipories from the surrounding hill tribes is the proper and only conclusion to be arrived at. I think it probable that when only a small part of the valley skirting the hills was capable of cultivation, the hillmen bordering it used to descend and cultivate the little land there then was, returning to their homes in the hills after reaping their harvests as, however, land increased, some few of them settled permanently in the plain, gradually increasing in numbers. The various tribes thus settling in different parts of the valley would in time come into contact, and after a struggle for supremacy, amalgamate. That this is what actually did take place is borne out by the traditions of Munnipore.”<sup>2</sup> Hodson is however unhappy as this hypothesis is not readily acceptable to the Manipuris who have been swayed by the new religion (Hinduism) and who want to maintain themselves as a separate race without any connection with the tribes in the surrounding hills. He further strengthens his stand by referring to the legends of their

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1. *Ibid*, p 6      2 *Ibid*, p.7

ancestors and various customs of the hill tribes observed by the Meeteis. The ceremony denominated Phambankaba or ascending the throne, is performed in Naga dress, both by the king and the queen, and the Yim Chou, or 'great house', the original residence of the Meetei Chief, is, though he does not now reside in it, still kept up, and is made in the Naga fashion. A more striking reference is also given to the Kangla or Coronation Hall which shows that the front beams of the roof have crossed and carved ends. This is distinctly reminiscent of the houses of Khullakpas of Naga villages. Thus Hodson, rejecting the Hindu Descent view, reached his own conclusion that the people in the plain, the Meeteis ( Manipuris ) are the descendants of the surrounding hill tribes. <sup>1</sup>

Captain Pemberton another British writer closely observed the Non—Aryan Mongoloid features of the Meeteis and repudiated the claim of the Manipuris for a Hindu Descent. For him, the Manipuris are descendants from a Tartar Colony of China<sup>2</sup>. Instances are, however, there for the Mongoloid easterners coming down to this valley. In the prehistoric days also some of Sawang Nonfurels' men ( five sons of Yaochik from China ) migrated to this land and settled at Susa Kameng. These were the people called Chakpas. They came when the Angoms were reigning in this land. These immigrants did not mix up with the people of this land and remained as Chakpa Lois. Later many easterners came and settled in this land joining the native population as Nongpok-Haram Yumnaks. In 698 A.D. Samlung, brother of Sukanfa, king of the Pongs, came to this land and stayed for ten years at Apong Inghol (to the east of the old palace, Kangla). Then he went back to his country following the Irii river upstream towards the north east.<sup>3</sup> In the year 1250 A.D. the Chinese invaded

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1. *Ibid.*, p. 6    2. *Ibid.*

3. *Khelchandra, Cheitharol Kumbaba*, p. 5

this land. The Tartar emperor, conquered China and Kublai Khan, brother of the Tartar emperor, invaded Manipur. But Meetei King Puranthaba and his men, with advantage on the western bank of the Ningthi river, were waiting for the invading army. The Meeteis defeated the invading Chinese and Tartar army signally. The captives were settled at Susa Kameng with those early chakpas. Some of the survivors went back to their country.<sup>1</sup> In support of this Sir James Johnstone also wrote, "about the year 1250 A D. a large Chinese force invaded the country, and was signally defeated; all who were not killed being made prisoners. These taught the Manipuris silk culture, and a number of them were settled at Susa Kameng in the valley, where they have still descendants." Again in 1470 A D Choufa Kekhomfa, King of Pong and the Meetei King Kyamba Jointly invaded Kabo Kyang (now part of Burma).<sup>2</sup> There were interactions of the Meeteis with the Chinese, Tartars and the Pongs from the earliest days. But from these instances, it would not be proper, as Pemberton thought, to assume that the people in this land were descendants from a Tartar colony from China. Many of them in course of time joined the original population known as Meeteis taking their yek with the brand Nongpok-Haram (Immigrants who came from the east, but who became the Meeteis)

R Brown, another British writer, found the origin of the Meeteis to be obscure. Their written records, he observed, had been mostly composed since they became Hindus, and therefore, were not worthy of much credit. He writes, 'from the most credible traditions the valley appears originally to have been occupied by several tribes, the principal of which were named Khumul, Luang, Moirang, and Meitheis, all of whom came from different directions.

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1 Singh, R.K Sanahal, *Satjal*, p. 58

2. Johnstone, J , *Manipur and Naga Hills*, p 80

3 *Khelchandra, Cheitharol Kumbaba*, p.9

For a time the Khumul appears to have been the most powerful, and after its declension the Moirang tribe. But by degrees the Meitheis subdued the whole, and the name Meithei has become applicable to all.<sup>1</sup> He was also told about the Indo-Aryan origin of the people in this land, But like other British writers, he also had a very poor impression about it. His conclusion is simply that the origin is obscure.

Sir James Johnstone gave a very interesting account of the Manipuris as being a fine stalwart race descended from an Indo-Chinese stock, with some admixture of Aryan blood, derived from the successive waves of Aryan invaders that passed through the valley in pre-historic days. Manipuris have stable and industrious qualities which the Burmese and Shans do not possess. The race has been constantly fed by additions from the various hill tribes surrounding the valley.<sup>2</sup> His view seems to be a consolidation of many other views. That in the Meetei Population there are Nongpok Haram Yumnaks (Easterners mainly from Pong, Burma and China) and also Nongchup Haram Yumnaks (westerners mainly from the Indo Aryan stock) is a fact. The known record Cheitharol Kumbaba and other traditional legends bear evidence to it. The view that the hill tribes from the surrounding hills constantly fed the plain population cannot be ignored in as much as many outstanding personalities of the Meeteis are found to be having hill origin. The only difference which Johnstone has on the issue of the origin of the Meeteis from the traditional account is his silence over the native population who had been living in this land since the time when no immigrants had come over here. Thus it is particularly this aspect of the native people that he did not properly look into. Otherwise his view has many elements of truth.

1. Brown, R., *Statistical Account of Manipur*, p 57

2. Johnstone, Sir James, *Manipur and Naga Hills*, p. 97



A still interesting account is that of Brian Houghton Hodgson who expressed that "in the 'Moitar' of Manipur we have the combined appellations of the Siamese Tai and the Kochin Chinese Moy. In other words, the Manipurian tribe, called Cossrahs by the Bengalese, belongs to the Moi section of the great tribe called Tai by themselves and Shanvel Syan by the Burmese, the sectional name being also foreign and equivalent to the native."<sup>1</sup> As has been stated earlier, the people of this land had close relation with the Shan Kingdom of pong But this does not necessarily mean that the people of this land are but descendants from the shans.

We have seen different accounts of the people in this land from the Manipuri Brahmins, as well as the British writers The Indo-Aryan Account as given by the Manipuri Brahmins simply speaks about the western immigrants, particularly of the Vedic Aryans in the early days and the Brahmins in the last five centuries. The British accounts, no doubt, gave hints to the solution of the problem, but not the solution itself since they could not get into the details of these people. This was the period of Hindu zenith in this land A careful look into the ancient tradition and culture, the traditional legends and sayings, the valued Meetei puyas (left by the great Marchous) would certainly throw sufficient light on the origin of the Meeteis

As a distinct mark of the relation between the Meeteis in the plain and the Tangkhuls in the north-eastern hills there is the Phumbankaba (ascending the throne) ceremony of the Meetei kings This practice was followed right from the time of Nongtalai pakhangba, the first ruler of this land in the historic age till the last king According to legends Nongtalai is belived to have come down to the valley following the course of the Irii river which has its source in the north eastern hills where the Tangkhuls habitate. Presumably to remember their close relation with the Tangkhuls,

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1. *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, Vol. XXII (1853), pp. 14—15.

the Meetei kings might have used Tangkhul costumes at the time of coronation. So close is the relation that still today a native blanket called Leirloom is a customary presentation by the bride's parents in every Meetei marriage ceremony. Leirloom is a real Tangkul cloth pattern. Another glaring instance is that of Lai-Haraoba festival in which the divine partner Nongpok Ningthou and Panthoibi should be represented in the form of a Tangkhul youth and a girl (somebody should assume the roles of Tangkhul youth and girl). Further, 'Tangkhul Saram Pakhangba', is an utterance frequently used in the Lai Haraoba. Shri Narendra Singh, with reference to the Lai Khunda and Meihourol Yimbi puyas, says that Poirai Ningthou Hanba Nganba Khaufaba Thonga Themfaba ( the foremost chief of the Nganbas ) had by his wife Khamen Lokpam chanu two sons, Tangkhul and Khaba. This speaks of the close blood relation between the Tangkhuls and the Meeteis. Still today in a remote Tangkhul village, there was preserved a flag bearing the symbol of the coiling snake (Meetei Royal Symbol). This also signifies the deep relation between the two groups of people. <sup>1</sup> The closeness of the relation is not less with the Kabuis of the west. Lamleksang, brother of Nungou Yimthangba, the ancestor of the Sarang-Lersangthem, had gone to the hills and settled there permanently. His descendants became the Kabuis in the south western hills <sup>2</sup> Cultural integration of the Meeteis and the Kabuis has been facilitated by the great contribution of the kabui Maibas ( persons who know the secrets of taming wild evil spirits ) In the ancient days Kabui Tomba, a divine personality, tamed the uncontrollable demonical python in the Loktak lake to save the widow and son of his friend. The life of Khamba, the romantic hero of Moirang Kangleilon, was saved by Kabui Salang Maiba.

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1. *Ching Amasung Tamgi Mari, The Manipur Cultural Integration Conference*, p. 13

2. *Ibid*, pp. 42-43

The Kabui Keioiba legend still plays its role in both the Meetei and Kabui society. It is even claimed that Apoinana Marchou, the top Maichou in the time of king Khangemba, because of his name having a Kabui bearing, was a Kabui. With the Anals, the Moyons, the Monsangs and the Tarags, of the south and the south-east, the ancestral goddess Sangku Leima (consort of the most freightful and revered Tutelar deity, Wangbren, of the south) is believed traditionally to be an Anal lady.<sup>1</sup> The Murrings have a close relation with the Khumals, a strong and powerful group of the Meeteis. Sembi Mimaba, a Khumal chief, when dethroned by his rivals, went to the nearby southern hills. He was sheltered by the Murrings and ultimately he and his descendants became Murrings.<sup>2</sup> Even the Khongjais who are taken to be hill immigrants, their traditions and culture having a high amount of similarities with the plain tradition and culture, are believed to have been here in the beginning but they had gone to other places in the ancient times. Later, they came back to this land as immigrants having scattered habitations. Their birth ritual, marriage and other ceremonies have great resemblance to those of the plain people.<sup>3</sup> Among the hill tribes Chothe—Wainem people used to burn the dead. Thus the other hill tribes, like Kom, Chothe, Korreng, etc. also have very much similar traditions and customs with the Meeteis.

The above are few instances of the hill and Plain relation. The deeper we go into the traditions and customs of both the hills and plain, the closer will be the relation between the two.

As to how the present hill tribes in different directions had settled in the long past, Shri Bhogeshore Singh and R.K. Sanahal Singh referred to Nongpok Ningthou and Panthoibi legend. When the flood water in the valley had been drained away by Nongpok through a hole in the sou

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1, *Ibid.*, p. 68      2. *Ibid.*, p. 44      3. *Ibid.*, p. 69

thern hills, and the valley became fit for habitation, Nongpok called upon all divine and human beings, who were once in the said valley, to resume their habitation. When all so came up, Nongpok was made king of the land. He nominated eight divine personalities to be Tutelar deities, All beings, human and divine followed the Tutelar deity of their choice in the eight different directions. They went shouting the slogan *Hou Hou*. It is from this *Hou Hou* that these people, when settled permanently in the hills of different directions, became known as Haos in the later days<sup>1</sup> Still to-day, the Tutelar Deities and the heroes who went with the deities, are worshipped with great reverence. According to this account the hillmen of today are none but the descendants of those dedicated ancestors who volunteered for tutelar duties. The Tutelar Deities and the associate groups of people who became hillmen in different directions are shown below :<sup>2</sup>

Direction	Tutelar Deities	Their associates
1. North	Marching	Maos and Marams
2. North-East	Chingkhei Ningthou	TangkhuIs
3. East	Nongpok Ningthou	TangkhuIs & Murrings
4. South East	Irum Ningthou	Murrings & Taraos
5. South	Wangbren	Anals, Nanfous, Moyon & Monsangs
6. South West	Thangjing	Koirengs
7. West	Loyarakpa	Cheroos
8. North West	Kouburu	Kabuis

Later when Nongtalai Pakhangba became king of this land, the descendants of those great ancestors who went with their Tutelar Deities were asked to come down and settle in the plain like their other brothers. But they expressed their happiness to be in the hills for tutelar duties. The following traditional song bears evidence for this<sup>3</sup>

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1. *Hou Hou* signifies the expression of acceptance.
  2. Singh, O. Bhogeshore, *Ningthourol Seireng*, pp. 32, 33 and also Singh, R K *Sanahal, Satjal*, pp, 149, 150
  3. Singh, R.K. *Sanahal, Satjal*, p, 37

“Meetei Poirei Lemayol  
Kangla Sana Pungmayol  
Chingna Koina Pansaba  
Laina Koina Pan Ngakpa.”

**The song meant** The land of the Meeteis is the heart of the Earth, Kangla ( the first dried place)—the golden mount It is fortified by hills on all sides The gods are on the surrounding hills protecting it.

But the text of the song had been changed later at the time of Nongtalai Pakhangba as below :

Meetei Poirei Lemayol  
Kangla Sana Pungmayol  
Chingna Koina Pansaba  
Haona Koina Pan Ngakpa.

There is a change in the last line which brings Hao in place of Lai. Haona means the hillmen who are believed to be the descendants of those brave ancestors who went to the hills with the tutelar deities shouting the slogan Hou Hou. The word Hao as used here has a respectable meaning. But in modern days, it carries a meaning indicating tribals in the surrounding hills This development is due to the conversion of Meeteis to Hinduism that caused the separation of the hill and plain people socially.

What is most fundamental in the close relation between the people in the surrounding hills and those in the plain is their religious and emotional unity found in their traditional belief in the One Supreme Ultimate Father - the Ultimate Source and Background of all things and beings. This Supreme being has been called by various names in their dialects It is called Hapou Lagang (the foremost ancestor) by the Kabuis, Arapio (the Ultimate Ancestor of the ancestors) by the Longmeis, Patheng ( Real Ultimate Father ) by

the Khongjais, Kamio Vara Vari (the ever peaceful Ultimate Father who created the Universe) by the Tangkhuls, Asha Paban (the Heavenly Father) by the Pakhans, Moyons, Mon-sangs and Anals, Patheng (the Real Ultimate Father) by the Koms and Rems, and Poklen Pokpa Satlen Satpa-Tengbanba Mapu ( the Ultimate Ancestor of the Ancestors — The Supreme Lord of the Universe) by the Meeteis.<sup>1</sup> Ancestor-worship presupposes some basis in family and social feeling, some sense of the unity and continuity of the tribes

Still another social character prevalent in both the hills and the plain is that each tribe is divided into seven units. This bears important significance and suggests the close relation between the hills and the plain. Instances of certain tribes and their constituent units are shown below :

Name of the tribe	Constituent units
1. The Meeteis	Mangang, Luwang, Khuman, Angom, Moirang, Kha-Nganba and Sarang-Leisangthem
2. The Tangkhuls	Duidang, Sadang, Khapudang, Khadang, <i>Choudang Sithudang</i> and <i>Kingdang</i> , Saifu, Saichal, Rangla, Rakhou, Seilom, Mariam and Khailon.
3. The Murrings	Dolla, Raja, Dingthoi, Thoitak, Chongdur, Sampu and Thanga
4. The Kabuis	Kamei, Gangmei, Longmei, Golmei, Rengmei, Palmei and Phaomei.
5. The Kairengs	Yoite, Songthu, Leisen, Tumtin, Tente, Walba and Mikal.
6. The Anals	Munchal, Masum, Pasen, Changtung, Runlal, Hrang and Yasa.
7. The Chothe and Koms	Yuhreng, Thao, Marin, Parpa, Rang-sai, Makal and Rakkon.

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1. *The Manipur Cultural Integration Conference, Ching Amasung Tamgi Mari*, pp. 70, 71.

Name of the tribe	Constituent units
8. The Moyons & Monsangs	Rhuint Rongban, Chunin + Nungchim, Seso + Hungcha, Songsin + Khartu, Ngru + Langbam, Sirthum + Turip & Aungjir + Chari. <sup>1</sup>

Thus, though circumstances make them grow into different tribes and live quite apart from one another, speaking different dialects, they cannot be considered in isolation for they live as members in a harmonious integrated system. The Meeteis believe, as the puyas like *Leithak Leikhalon* and *Wakoklon* reveal, that the human species had been created by the divine *Ashiba* or *Sanamah*. The tradition of the Meeteis has it that they are the descendants of the seven sons of *Ipathou Pakhangba*, the Grand Ancestor, the son of *Salailel Sidaba*, the Lord of all beings, by *Leimalel Sidabi*, the Supreme divine mother. The seven sons of *Pakhangba* were the ancestors of the seven *yek/salays* of the Meeteis. The ancient names of the land such as *Tilli Koktong Ahanba* and *Mira Pongthoklam* etc. found in the ancient puyas of the Meeteis are all suggestive of the ancient habitation in this land. In *Tilli Koktong Ahanba*, *Tilli* means the species of mankind, *Koktong* means the mount (*Atongba*) where *Til*, the ancestor of mankind, was born, and *Ahanba* means the foremost. In *Mira Pongthok Lam* also, *Mi*, *Ra* or *La*, and *Pong* were expressions signifying mankind of the ancient time; while *Thoklam* means the place where they used to come out for habitation. At any rate these traditional accounts made the Meeteis firmly convinced that they had a divine origin and had been living in this land right from the ancient days. But these living traditional beliefs of the Meeteis shall have to be assessed properly in the light of modern scientific approaches of historical research and anthropology. In the absence of such an approach the origin of the Meeteis shall remain an obscurity.

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1. *Chung Tam Amatani*, p. 6

In ancient days there was migration of people from this land also. Legends tell us that Mayangs, Takhels, Moirangs, Pashas, Khakis and Erangkas are the descendants of sons of king Kangba<sup>1</sup>. The traditional way of ascertaining whether a group of people is native or migrated is to see if they have stories of migration in their accounts of habitation in this land. Different Puyas refer to a flood when the whole valley was under water. According to the Puya, Koubru Chingoirol, flood water was drained by Khongdeva, son of Koubru, away through a hole in the southern hill at a place called Ching-nunghut. People who were engaged in the draining away of water and in constructing streams and rivers in the valley were not regarded as immigrants. They were native people and started settling on dry mounts. The story of Reservation of dry mounts by different groups of original inhabitants is found in the Pung Kanba Puya (Pung = Mount, Kanba = Reservation). As to the ancestors of these people, Krakhong Lamlen Puya says that Lainingthou, the Supreme Lord of the Universe, burst forth into two, just like the bursting forth of the germinating seed. One was Cheng Nganba, the first male, the other was Cheng Nganbi, the first female. Leikoi was born of them, Mihinglen Sidaba was born of Leikoi, Angang of Mihinglen, Hunganglen of Angang, Tumaringba of Hunganglen; Ngaite, Nate and Noughingling were born of Tumaringba. They were the seedling of mankind.

There is no doubt that immigrants came to this land both in the pre historic and in historic days, but they joined the native population of the land as Nongpok Haram (Easterners) and Nongchup Haram (Westerners) people and merged themselves like rivulets flowing down into the main river. There are cultural connections between the Meeteis and the tribes in the hills. But the origins of the Meeteis are obscure in the absence of clear data. The Meetei language belongs

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1. *Luwang N.A., Kangbalon, pp. 8—9*



to the general Tibeto-Burman group, but Grierson doubts about the adequacy of Kuki-Chin to delineate the sub group to which this language belongs.<sup>1</sup> The culture of the Meeteis is remarkably different from that of any of the tribes in and around Manipur. They exhibit a marvellous power of assimilation of diverse features of different tribal cultures while preserving things of artistic and spiritual value in their own culture.

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## Chapter—II

### GODS

Religion is one of the deepest and most engrossing forms of human activity. It seeks to present a view of the world which satisfies the spiritual and emotional needs of man. Anthropologists are of the opinion that religion, in the sense of a belief in spirits or higher powers of some kind, is a universal phenomenon.<sup>2</sup> There is no race devoid of religion, but there are differences in the degree in which religious ideas are developed among diverse races. The Meetei puyas reveal to us a stage of polytheistic religion, but a native bent towards unification was steadily fostered by reflection. All gods gradually dissolved into various manifestations of the one Supreme God. A religious growth of many centuries cannot admit of easy classification. A great many gods were named and adored. But beneath the crowding of gods and goddesses there was a tendency at systematization, a craving for the One Ultimate

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1. Grierson, G.A., *Linguistic Survey of India*, Vol. 3., 111, p 30

2. Tylor, E.B., *Primitive Culture*, Vol I, p. 417 f

**Principle of Existence.** What appears to be polytheistic anthropomorphism is found to be a step towards a spiritual monotheism. This ultimate principle was theistically conceived, and was known by various names. *Tengbanba Mapu* (the Supreme Lord of the Universe), *Yaibirel Sidaba* (Immortal Self), *Ipuroi Sidaba* (Immortal Ultimate Ancestor), so on. The One manifested into the many. The Supreme unity is realised in the diversity.

In *Leithak Leikhalon Puya* it is emphatically asserted that *Tengbanba Mapu* is everywhere, He embraces all as a boundless envelop. He alone remains when all the created heavens and earths, and all the deities disappear. While all things and beings are subject to decadence, death and disappearance, He is free from all these. He is transcendent of the world, but nevertheless He is immanent in all his manifestations. He is the principle of life and is seated within each being. He is represented by the supreme syllable 'Hum' or 'Hung'. The emanation of different deities from the Supreme Lord is the beginning of the creation.

*Atingkok Maru Sidaba* and *Amamba* are taken to be representing the One in the world of manifestations. The former is the Infinite Expanse which embraces all within him. The latter is the Supreme Infinite Darkness which pervades the former. *Atingkok* and *Amamba* are taken always together being the starting point for all manifestations. The honour and glory given to the One, the Supreme Lord of the Universe, are given to *Atingkok* and *Amamba*. In *Leithak Leikhalon*, *Atingkok* and *Amamba* are addressed as primal and eternal that could not be consumed by the devastating Fire of the *chak-end* (*chak* represents time). Time appears to be real in the world of manifestations. When all disappeared into the supreme One, there is no manifestation, no time, no space as all are within Him.<sup>1</sup> The *puyas* place *Atingkok Maru Sidaba* at the top of all ancestral genealogy, divine and human, of each *yek* of the *Meeters*.

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1. *Leithak Leikhalon*, p. 4

Amamba is addressed as Nong, the Lainingshing Heiyi, the Supreme Lord of the Universe. It is from this Amamba that everything comes out and it is to this Amamba that everything returns. The process of coming out and then returning to this Amamba is the universal process of life and death and rebirth of all things and beings, divine and human, which the Meetei Puyas call Tanna-Yai.<sup>1</sup> Amamba is described as the very ground of all things and beings, divine and human. He is the most ancient and the different deities are his emanations. He is seated within each being, controlling and regulating its life. The moment he leaves the body of a being, the latter ceases to live.<sup>2</sup>

Viewed from the point of view of the world of manifestations, Atingkok Maru Sidaba and Amamba are eternal and supreme. But from the standpoint of the Tengpanba Mapu, they are the most ancient manifestations of His infinite essence. Atingkok and Amamba cannot be taken apart from each other. The vast infinite expanse, formless and boundless, is the inexhaustible source of all things and beings, and this has been pervaded by the supreme infinite Darkness called Amamba. The saying of the Leithak Leikhalon Puya that when all have disappeared, including the gods, there remained two primal deities, means that Atingkok and Amamba remained as the two expressions of the ultimate reality. There is the further saying of Leithak Leikhalon that 'Atingkok and Amamba are the primal and eternal deities with whom Tengbanta Mapu devised the creation anew'.<sup>3</sup>

According to the Meetei puyas, the primal beings emanated out of the Supreme following the primal sound Hung issued forth from Him. These are also revered as deities of importance. They are, Leipak (the earth), Nongthou (the heaven), Fire, Water, Air, Sachik (morning star), Thaba

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1 *Piba A*, Eeyek/Salai, pp 150. 55

2 *Ibid*, pp. 174-75

3. *Leithak Leikhalon*, p.4

(Evening star), Thawanmichak Nongthou Sidaba (pole star), the sun, the moon, Khongchomnupi (great bear), Apakma (the stars and planets). Though they are addressed as gods, the puyas show them to be not of eternal order as they are subject to decadence and disappearance.<sup>1</sup> They are however described as superior to those in the mortal scheme. The Leithak Leikhalon Puya further says that these primal manifestations were originally within the womb of Atingkok Maru Sidaba.

Besides these primal manifestations, there are other deities of importance, like Atiya Sidaba (Immortal Infinite Sky), Ashiba (the deity to whom was entrusted the task of creating the Universe), Konchin Tingthokpa (the deity who would ultimately descend into the human world to guide and lead mankind), Nongthang Leima (the deity of lightning and enchantment) etc. People ordinarily leave them aside as these deities are not so directly connected with their immediate problems. Only on some occasions they remember and worship them.

In order to create the world of living beings, according to Wakoklon Hilel Thilel Salai Amailon Puya and Sakok Puya, Tengbanba Mapu manifested Himself as two deities. His right became Lainingthou, and His left became Lairembi. Lainingthou is addressed as Salaliel Sidaba, and Lairembi as Lemalel Leishi Leipunbi. They are the supreme Pa and Pi (parents) for the whole world. Salaliel and Lemalel had their male and female divine associates manifested from the Supreme. They lived at the peak of Koubru. Koubru is thus revered as the sacred place in a traditional song.

Awang Koubru Ashuppa  
Laiyam Khunda Ahanba  
Sanalik Mapal Thadringer  
Sanalik Mapal Thariba  
Nongthrei Mawoo Lingdringer  
Nongthrei Mawoo Lingliba<sup>2</sup>

1. *Ibid*

2. Singh. O.B., *Ningthourel Seireng*

( Koubru peak to the north is the highest place where gods made their foremost habitation, and created different orders of living beings. Gods are the roots from which living beings bloom like flowers )

Salailel is referred to as the High God for the world of living beings. He is addressed as the Taipangpanba Mapu (Lord of the World of living beings). He is the Deity ruling over the world of his associate deities with his consort Leimalel Sidabi. When Salailel was musing over the means as to how the world of living beings would be made Tengpanba Mapu sent a divine message that he would be descending himself into Salailel's place as a three-day-old child in an earthen pot, filled with water and preserved at a sacred place by Salailel and Leimalel, to help create the different living species of the world. Salailel did as asked by the Lord and found the three-day-old child. Salailel adopted the divine child as his own. The child was named Konsen Tulei Henba, Phuhingsana Pibarel. When grown up Phuhingsana Pibarel made the different orders of living species. Of all the created beings man was the last to come.<sup>1</sup> There is the legend of Konsen Tuleihenba becoming Lainingthou Sanamah, and Konchin Tukthaba, son of Salailel by Leimalel, winning the title Pakhangba. Sanamah and Pakhangba contested to win the throne of Salailel by going round the universe seven times. While Sanamah went round the world physically, Pakhangba went round the throne seven times according to the secret about his father's throne divulged by his mother, Leimalel Sidabi. Konchin Tukthaba was given the title Pakhangba as he knew the secret of his father (Pakhangba — he who knows his father—meaning the ultimate source of his being). Tuleihenba came late after going round the

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1 This Konsen Tulei Henba of Wakokonl is khoyum Ashuba of Lethak Leikhalon Puya. He is later known as Sanamah Lainingthou.

world and found himself deprived of the throne. His devastating resentment was appeased by Salalel and Leimalel ultimately making him realise that he himself is the author of the Universe. He was given the title of Sanamahı (the main essence of all living beings). He is the indwelling spirit of all living beings. Still today Sanamahı is the presiding deity in the Khunai of the Meetei.

Regarding Salalel and Leimalel there is the traditional belief in their identification with Atiya Sidaba ( the sky above ) and Malem Leima ( Mother earth ) Atiya is Nongthou—the heaven taken to be the supreme father, and Leimalel is the earth below—the Malem, the supreme Mother. In between Nongthou,—the sky up, the heaven, and Malem—the earth below, there are the three mighty forces (tarrungs) of Fire, Air and Water. The whole universe is but a product of the interplay of those primal elements according to a cosmic principle. Lainingthou Sanamahı (Khoyum Ashiba) who is the main agent for the divine creation is the cosmic energising principle that controls the three Tarrungs of Fire, Air and Water. Sanamahı is represented as bestowing energy and life on the world of living beings. It is mainly for this reason that he is regarded as the supreme presiding deity in the later phase of Meetei Religion

In Lenthak Leikhalon Puya many deities are shown to have been manifested from the Supreme God for the purpose of creation of the universe. The Meetei tradition refers to the dynamic role of seven divine girls called Lai Nurah Taret and the nine divine youths called Laipungthou Mapal. They are revered in the traditional Maibi Dance depicting the ancient creation at the beginning of the days' play in the Lai-haraoba festival. This is still a living custom. Not only these, there are many other ancient deities who are mentioned in the puyas, but who are almost in oblivion as they are not directly associated with the activities of the human beings in their everyday life. In their place there are

other deities, tutelar, domestic, ancestral and also public. Whatever may be the situation, the religion of the Meeteis carries with it a number of deities, high and low. These even include human beings who attained the order of the deities by virtue of their superior disposition, efficiency and antiquity. But all these deities are taken to be manifestations of the Supreme God to serve His own purpose. God realises Himself in and through His own Manifestations.

The Meeteis use the term 'Umanglai' to denote deities of different categories. However there are various interpretations of the term 'Umanglai' as expressed by different scholars. Hodson gives the meaning of the term Umanglai as deities of the Forest.<sup>1</sup> K B Singh regards the term as indicating tree deities.<sup>2</sup> Shakespear also subscribed to the view of Hodson.<sup>3</sup> Dr Saroj Nalini Parratt says that Umanglais were never regarded as limited to particular forest areas. While disagreeing with the interpretation of Umanglai as forest deities or tree deities, she thinks that the term "Umanglai" is used generally to cover all categories of gods, although it has a narrower meaning when applied specifically to the first of these groups. As she observes,

"The Umanglai may be classified broadly into four groups —

a) Ancestors or deities which were believed to have had a human existence at some point in the past. Examples of these are Pakhangba, Nongpok Ningthou, Poireiton.

b) Important lai associated with one particular yek.

c) The domestic deities which are the possession of particular clan or family groups. These are properly called yumjao lai.

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1 Hodson, *The Meitheis*, p. 96

2 Singh, K B., *Traces of Pre-Hinduism in Meitei Society*, p. 201

3 Shakespear, *The Religion of Manipur*, p. 407

d) Tutelary deities, i.e., guardian spirit connected with particular places or areas. There are various places in Manipur which are regarded as sacred. These are often hills, which are associated with a particular deity. Examples of this are Thangjing hill in Moirang, and Nongmaiching, which was formerly associated with Nongpok Ningthou and subsequently with Siva”<sup>1</sup>

Compared to others Parratt's view is more in consonance with the traditional approach. Her only difficulty in the discussion of lais (deities) is her complete silence over the issue as to what significance the Umanglais have in the religious and philosophical life of the Meeteis. It seems that she has scattered the umanglais without any reference to a systematic unity.

The literal meaning of 'umanglai' is forest deities. But as the tradition of the Meeteis reveals, it has a different significance. Yumnaba Tamphajao, a researcher in this field writes thus, "The One, the Supreme Lord of the Universe, reveals Himself as Umanglais to show mankind His different traces in the deep dark wood of worldly manifestations. The traces of the Lord of the Universe who is within each being, when set outside in the world of manifestations, are called Umanglais"<sup>2</sup>. There are two kinds of Umanglais being worshipped by the people. Some worship umanglai as Lainingthou (the Supreme male deity), while some others worship Umanglai as Lairembi (the Supreme female deity). This only shows that the world of living beings is the world of two, the Pa and Pi. The Supreme Lord of the universe with his hairlock on the front is the Supreme Pa, Lainingthou, and with its hairlock at the back is the Supreme Pi, Lairembi. The one can be worshipped either as Lainingthou, or as Lairembi,

1. Parratt, S.N., *The Religion of Manipur*, p. 9

2. Tamphajao Y. Meetei Lai Haraobagi Wangulol, p. 1



according to the likes of the people. But that makes no difference as the worship refers to the Lord. The different places of the Umanglais do not make any difference in offering prayer and worship to the Supreme Lord. The different Umanglais are the different traces of the same Lord

Another writer, Shri H. Kullabidhu in his article 'Mera Mel Tongba' brings out the implication of Umanglai thus : "In course of the attempt to realise the true self ( the soul- the Thawai in Meetei language), it is found that it has 361 /364 traces. These traces are worshipped as Umanglais. The Umanglais are the main centres for tracing the Supreme. They are the different aspects of the Lord"<sup>1</sup> He further says that the religion and philosophy of the Meeteis have self-realisation as the end of life.

The Umanglais are thus deities which are but traces and manifestations of the Tengbanba Mapu. Writers who take Umanglais as Forest deities following its literary meaning cannot satisfactorily explain the religious and philosophical significance of the Umanglais as impressed upon the Meeteis who are worshipping them since time immemorial. In fact because of the traditional preservation of a grove, or forest area, or a place decorated with trees and plants as the abode of a particular deity outside the residential campus of the people, these Meetei deities have been termed as Umanglais. But from this it would not be proper to reduce the Lord of the Universe ( the Tengbanba Mapu ) to the level of a forest spirit.

The number of Umanglais is said to be either 361 or 365. They include tutelary, ancestral, domestic and yek deities. To the original Umanglais have been added human personalities of the later age who attained the order of the divine by virtue of their superior disposition, nature and

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1. *Meiteigi Haro Kummeigi Seminar, p. 33*

efficiency that placed them above the normal human beings. Khagemba, Khunjaoba, Khongnangthaba etc are human personalities. But they are now worshipped as umanglais.

Following the puyas and the traditions of the Meeteis, it is evident that certain gods have been associated with particular places. They are treated as guardians of particular directions and areas ( Maikel Ngakpa Lais ). Lerthak Leikhalon speaks about the deities who took care of the places above the earth and below the heaven. The deities were Manchupa, Laisei, and Senkheiren. The book made reference to Leisatao for the west, Nongsatao for the south, Leikhomtao for the east and Nongkhomtao for the north <sup>1</sup> Shri Khulem Chandrasekhore Singh gives the name of eight tutelar deities for the eight directions as below : <sup>2</sup>

Name of the deities	Directions
1. Nongpok Ningthou	Nongpok (East)
2. Nongchup Ariba	Nongchup (West)
3. Khana Chaoba	Makha (South)
4. Soraren	Awang (North)
5. Koubru	Liklam/Laiji (north-west)
6. Wangbren	Meiram (South East)
7. Thangchung	Santhong (South West)
8. Chingkhel Ningthou	Nongpok/Laiji (North-East)

Another writer, R K Sanahal Singh, again gives his view that there were eight deities assigned for tutelar duties. Their names and directions are given below <sup>3</sup>

Names of the deities	Directions
1. Nongpok Ningthou	Nongpok (East)
2. Irum Ningthou	Meiram (South-East)
3. Wangbren	Makha (South)
4. Thangjing	Moirang Santhong (South-West)
5. Khorifaba	Nongchup (West)
6. Loiyrakpa	Koubru Laiji (North-West)
7. Marjing	Awang (North)
8. Chingkhel Ningthou	Chingkhel (North-East)

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1. Singh, Y B , *Leithak Leikhalon*, pp 23,36

2. Singh, K C , *Lai Haraoba Lalson*, p. 73

3. Singh, R.K., *Satjal*, p.31

With little variance from the above views, Dr. Parratt writes, "There are four of these lai each associated with a particular geographical direction. Thangjing, whom we have seen to be specially associated with the Moirangs, was the guardian of the south west, Marjing of the North-east, Wangbren (Wangpurel) of the south-east and Koubru of the north-West. The authors of the Census Report of 1961 (4) regard the function of the tutelary deities as to protect the land against sickness and death entering the state from without."<sup>1</sup> She also refers to the view of K. B. Singh that there are three deities more. They are Nongpok Ningthou of the East, Yangoi Ningthou of the West, and Chingkhel or Yaitu Ningthou of the North-east. K. B. Singh gives only seven tutelary deities making no mention of the south. The views of the above writers seem to be based on their different informations. But whatever their views are, the living tradition of the Meeteis still makes it clear that they worship Marjing of the north, Chingkhel Ningthou of the north-east, Nongpok Ningthou of the east, Irum Ningthou of the south-east, Wangbren (Wangpurel) of the south, Thangjing of the south-west, Loiyarakpa of the west, and Koubru of the north-west. In a Particular area of his control and jurisdiction, the particular tutelary deity is worshipped with attention, care and reverence. Below we give a description of these deities.

According to Leithak Leikhalon Puya, Marjing (originally Maraching) came out from the intestines of Atiya Sidaba drawn out to catch hold of the divine horse (Sakou) emanating from the foot of Ashiba.<sup>2</sup> Marjing is regarded as one of the five deities that enter into the human body and is seated there as one of the souls.<sup>3</sup> Later this deity was found associated with the main sport of the Meeteis called Sagol Kangjei. As Parratt says, "his main importance in Meitei mythology is that he is credited with the

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1. Parratt, S N, *The Religion of Manipur*, p. 27

2. Singh, Y B, *Leithak Leikhalon*, p. 38 f

3. *Ibid*, p.55

invention of polo, the national game."<sup>1</sup> According to the traditional belief of the Meeteis, Sagol Kangjei ( Polo ) was played originally by gods, seven on each side. Still today the Meeteis play this game on horse back with a stick called Kangchei (Kangjei), having seven players on each side. They use a ball called Kangdrum made of bamboo root. It is believed traditionally that the first Sakol Kangjei was played by gods during Lai haraoba festival expressing rejoicings at the rehabilitation of the people in the valley by the divine service of Nongpok Ningthou.

As a tutelary deity Marjing is associated with the North. There is the abode of this deity at a village named Heingang to the north of Imphal. Annually offerings are made to this deity, in which the main item is a Kangchei (Polo stick) and a ball (Kangdrum) made of bamboo root. As recorded in Chertharol Kumbaba, during the reign of king Khagemba there was a public worship of the deity at his abode and also at every watery place on the river side. The offerings made included wild boar, duck, cocks and hens, pigeons and other living things. This was in the year 1618 A D .<sup>2</sup>

Chingkei Ningthou is the tutelary deity of the north-east. Nothing is said about this deity in the Royal Chronicle. Chingkhel, however, has got specific religious and philosophical significance in the life of Meetei Khunai (society). To get good health and long life, the Meeteis, in the early dawn of the day, worship the deity facing the North-east (Chingkhel). The deity Chingkhel represents the Supreme God to whom all prayer is offered. The man who knows the secrets of this Chingkhel Phithup Ahum (the three-fold secrets of Chingkhel) is considered to be knowing the three-fold secret of the Supreme Lord represented by the complete course of a day (from one sun rise to the next sun rise).

1. Parratt, S N., *The religion of Manipur*, p. 30

2. *Chertharol Kumbaba*, p 25

Though Nongpok Ningthou has a significant place for the whole of the Meetei community, he is regarded as a tutelary deity for the east. The Nongmaiching hill situated to the east of the Imphal valley is taken to be his abode. The water flowing down from this hill into a rivulet called Chingko is taken to be pure and sacred just like the water of the Ganges for the Hindus. After the conversion of the Meeteis into Hinduism, they identified the Meetei deity Nongpok Ningthou with Siva. Every year on the 28th day of the month of Lamta the deity is worshipped.

Nongpok Ningthou and his divine consort Panthoibi dominated the whole social, cultural and religious life of the Meeteis. It is believed traditionally that Nongpok made the valley fit for human habitation after the great flood. Still today the divine romantic legends of Nongpok and Panthoibi in their seven incarnated generations satisfy the romantic emotions of the people. It is believed that Nongpok is the Lord Sanamahi, the Supreme God of the Meeteis<sup>1</sup> The great socio-religious and cultural institution Laiharaoba makes the representation of Nongpok and Panthoibi an essential part of the festival. In a way Nongpok represents the Supreme being in his male form as Lainingthou, while Panthoibi represents the Supreme female deity, Lairembi (Leimarel). As his abode is at Nongmaiching hill (Nongmai Leihou Ching) which is to the east of the valley, he is made the tutelary deity of the east. However to worship Nongpok and Panthoibi is to worship Lainingthou and Lairembi which are the two aspects of the one.

Though there are many umanglais in the south-eastern direction of the valley, Irum Ningthou whose divine abode is near Kakching, a village near the foot of the south-eastern hills, is the tutelary deity of the south-eastern direction (Meiram). This deity is worshipped with great reverence by the people of that area. In times of sickness and disaster the

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1. Luwang, K A., *Ningthou Kangbarol*, pp 8-9

deity is considered to be the sole guardian who would protect the people from these calamities. There is, however, no specific record of this deity in the Chentharol Kumbaba.

The southern part of the valley was called Tharei Lamlei. This place is taken by the people to be the land of death, illness and disease. Wangbren (Wangpurel) is believed to be the dreadful deity of the south. While entering Wangbren's abode for prayer and worship, people should not speak unclean words, should not spoil the trees and plants growing there. The women while entering the place should not use luxurious ornaments. Members of the royal clan are not allowed to go to him, for it is considered to be an attempt to the throne. In the inner abode except the maibas and maibis and the Hanjaba, the leader of the devotees, nobody is allowed to enter. Even if they enter, they are not allowed to speak. In the abode of this deity, there are trees for each king. This is called Meetam U (the tree for that king). The growth, decay and falling of the tree indicated the well-being and ill fate of that king. There is the row of trees for the queens also. The traditional belief is that all the dead would go to the place of this deity and the virtues and vices in their past lives would be assessed by him. In the past people used to lay a long iron beam in the water of the river flowing at Sugnu which used to take all the waters of the valley. This was considered to be the main gate on the border line between the dead and the living. There were many precious articles including gold and silver that lay scattered and uncared for as they were all things offered to the deity by people. Nobody could take them through fear of death. Those who were sentenced to death or who were excommunicated from the society were sent to this place. These people, if they could manage to survive, lived in this place under the shelter of this dreadful deity<sup>1</sup>. Wangbren is taken to be a deity of water, who can cause instantaneous death and who assesses the virtues and vices of one who is dead, a

1. Sharma, A, *Manipur Itihas*, pp. 221-223

powerful tutelar deity reigning over the dreadful Thare! Lamlei (the low land of the south). There are many legends about this deity. A traditional legend says that in the assembly of gods at Koubru peak where Lainingthou, the Supreme Lord, was reigning, Wangbren was assigned for tutelar duties in the south, the Thare! Lamlei, a critical, dangerous place. Wangbren came to the south. When he arrived at Thare! Lamlei another god, who had not been in the assembly at Koubru challenged Wangbren. They fought for several days, but none could defeat the other. They disclosed their identities and became friends. They arrived at a decision that they together should perform the tutelar duty of the south. This deity is the Lokningthou of the south. Still today these two gods are in the same shrine. In addition to these two, there is the Lord Sanamah! also. There are other romantic legends of Wangbren. He used to have romantic relation with an Anal lady named Sangkuleima. He took her for his wife and entered in his abode in the water hurting the relatives of the lady including her father and the brothers as they resisted. On the request of the lady Wangbren gave them life back with the word that they should not further claim Sangkuleima. With the Mahous also, he has many legends. The Mahous, hill tribe in the adjoining areas of Sugnu, did not recognise Wangbren who was then in human form. Wangbren had a series of sportive competitions with the Mahou youths thereby showing his divine superiority over men. Still now there are stone boulders believed to have thrown by the Mahou youths and Wangbren in the Mahou village. There are only two references to the worship of this deity in the Cheitharol Kumbaba. One was in the reign of Nara Singh in 1848 A.D. in which the king offered a female servant to the deity, and the other in the reign of Churachand Singh in 1903 A.D. in which the king offered 1 bull and 1 servant <sup>1</sup>

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1. *Cheitharol Kumbaba*, pp. 275, 535

Shri Atombapu Sharma attempts to interpret Wangbren as an Aryan God 'Varun' who has his abode in the water, and who stands for strict rule and justice. He holds that the Aryan immigrants who came through the east had taken the prefix 'wang', a Burmese word which means the Supreme Lord of the Universe. According to him Wangbren is a combination of wang and varun.<sup>1</sup> But as has been explained above Wangbren ( Wangpurel ) is believed to be the native tutelary deity traditionally by the people of this land. This deity is more associated with the king of Moirang than with the Kanglei king. For the Meeteis Wangbren is the tutelary deity of the south who is but a manifestation of the Supreme God. In Wakoklon Hilel Thilel Salai Amailon Pukok puya Wangbren known as *Khana Chaopa Wangpulon* is one of the seven Laipungthous manifested from the Supreme, Ipung Loinapa Apakpa.<sup>2</sup>

As one of the main constituent units of the Meetei community the Moirangs live in the area where Lord Thangjing reigns supreme as a tutelary deity. He is taken by some writers to be the tribal deity of the Moirangs. Moirang is to the south-west of the valley of Manipur. The original abode of this deity is in the hills bearing the name of the deity. It is situated to the west of Moirang. The Moirang Ningthourol Lambuba Puya edited in modern script by O. Bhogeshwar Singh describes in detail the people of Moirang and their main God Tangjing Koilel Lai. Here Thangjing is addressed as the God king from whom have descended the people of Moirang. He is addressed as the creator and preserver of the people in Moirang Kanglei. In Leithak Leikhalon Puya in *Meesemlon* ( the creation of mankind ) Thangching (Thangjing) is referred to as one of the great deities who entered into the body of mankind as the souls of the human being.<sup>3</sup> In *Wakoklon Hilel Thilel Salai Amailon Pukok Puya* he is addressed

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1. Sharma, A., *Manipur Itihas*, p. 220

2. *Wakoklon*, p. 4

3. Y.B., *Leithak Leikhalon* p. 55



as Thangching Koilel Lai Sitapa, one of the Laipungthous who are different aspects of the Supreme Lord, Ipung Loi-napa Apakpa<sup>1</sup> In the famous Khamba Thoibi legend of Moirang Kangleirol, Thangjing is believed to be the supreme deity. In the said legend the uncontrollable bull caught by Khamba was offered to the deity This shows that the animal sacrifice to the deity was performed in the early days. About 45 kilometres from Imphal, at a place called Moirang, there is the temple of this Lord Thangjing From very early time the Laiharaoba festival is held at the premises of this deity annually.

The name of the western hill bordering the broad valley of Manipur is Loiching ( the hill of the Lois) Sekmai, Khurkhul, Koutruk, Phayeng, Leimram, Thongjao are all chakpa Lois They had their earliest settlements near the foot-hills of the western ranges which were called Loiching Chingsang. On the north there is the Koubru and on the south there is the Thangjing The place between is the area believed traditionally to be governed by Loiya Lakpa Though in this area there are many shrines of this deity, the main shrines are at Leimram and other Chakpa villages of the west. This deity is known more popularly as Loiya Lakpa Pangganba ( Loiya Lakpa, the powerful) There is a legend behind this. In the battle between the gods and the evil sarais ( spirits ) Loiyarakpa showed great courage and destroyed the evil spirits. Tradition has it that the rain of the year is believed to be sponsored by a deity. It may be by Koubru, or by Wangbren, or by Thangjing, or by Kounu, or by Loiya Lakpa Thus this deity, like other deities of importance, is also one which determines the fortune of the people in a particular year. The Lai Haraoba festival is held annually in the Laipung (courtyard) of this deity

Koubru peak is the abode of Lainingthou Koubru The abode of the deity bears the name of the deity Similar

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1. *Wakoklon*, p 4

is the case for Thangjing also. Thangjing has his original abode on the Thangjing hill. There is a confusion as to whether the deity Koubru at the Koubru peak is the Supreme Divine Pa, Salalel Sidaba who lived on the Koubru peak with his other divine associates. According to the tradition of the Meeteis Koubru is considered to be the place of supreme eminence which is very much connected with the life and growth of the Meeteis. This Koubru is so much connected with the Meetei life that it has been taken as the very Linfu (the uppermost soft portion of the brain) of the Meeteis wherefrom all went down towards the peripheral parts. In the villages lying at the outskirts of the Koubru peak there are shrines or Khubhams ( places preserved for the deity ) for the deity Koubru with his consort.

The Leithak Leikhalon Puya says that Koubru (called in the book Pongthanglen Kouparen ) is one the main deities who entered into the body as one of the five souls of the human being.<sup>1</sup> In Wakoklon Hilel Thilel Salai Pukok Puya also there is the reference to this deity as one of the Laipungthous manifested from the Supreme Ipung Loinapa Apakpa.<sup>2</sup> All these things clearly show that Koubru is one of the most important deities of the Meeteis. It is the traditional belief of the Meeteis that on the Koubru peak there are many places believed to be the abodes of different deities. Still today there is the tradition of pilgrimage on the mountain peak of Koubru during the five days after the celebration of Cheiraoba festival.

As to the worship of this deity, Koubru, there are many references in Cheitharal Kumbaba, the Royal Chronicle. In one place it is written, "All the deities including Koubru are worshipped at Kuchu beneath a sacred canopy by offering 100 each of buffaloes, goats, sheeps, cattle, geese, pigs,

1. *Leithak Leikhalon*, p. 55

2. *Wakoklon*, p. 4

fowls, pigeons, dogs, fruits and ginger. The worship was for long life."<sup>1</sup> This took place in the reign of king Khagemba on the occasion of the inauguration of Kangla in the month of Lamta in 1553 Saka era. Seeing the items of the offerings in which animals formed the major bulk of the sacrifices one can easily judge how little hold Hindu ideas had on the king at this time. The long life begged by the king in his prayer might be for the king himself and also for the whole people

In another place the chronicle mentions, "On Sunday the first day of the month of Sajibu, 1740 Saka era the deity Koubru fired a gun. The deity Koubru rejoiced in Lai-haraoba festival. All the courtiers and noblemen of the king witnessed the festival"<sup>2</sup> This firing of gun by Koubru is a very usual reference. Perhaps this meant thunderbolt. Another obscure reference is found. "On Tuesday the tenth day of the month of Wakehing, 1765 Saka era there was the spreading of white cloth at Koubru peak." This white cloth is taken to be the seat of the deity. It may be just an incident of snow fall at the Koubru peak in the winter or it may mean a canopy beneath which offerings were made.

Thus the tutelary deities are worshipped by the people with great reverence. It is believed that they would save them from diseases, death and disasters. They are considered to be the controlling gods of particular geographical directions.

If the tradition of the Meeteis is strictly followed, there are no deities which cannot be brought under the term Ancestral Deities. The Meeteis used to believe the deities, high and low, including the Supreme Atingkok, to be their ancestors. This is clearly evidenced by the writings in the Yek ancestral genealogy as shown in puyas like Leithak

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1. *Chettharol Kumbaba*, p. 27

2. *Chettharol Kumbaba*, p. 209

Leikhalon<sup>1</sup> Umanglais are also treated as ancestors Thangjing is considered to be the Ancestor of the Moirang yek. This is evidenced from the address given to Thangjing as Ibudhou Thangjing Koiel Lai (which means the deity Thangjing, the Great Grandpa) In the festivals, Lai Chaklon Katpa and Lai haraoba, the Maiba and Maibi attending the Lai (deity) address the related worshippers as the grandsons and granddaughters of the deity It is particularly for this reason that the outstanding feature of the Meetei Religion is taken to be ancestral worship Right from the direct parents the tracing starts till it reaches the only One Supreme Being, the One Supreme Ancestor from whom all have come out, the ancestor of ancestors

But Dr S N Parratt holds that the ancestral deities are belived to have had a human existence at some point of time in the past, e.g., Pakhangba, Nongpok-Ningthou, Poireiton.<sup>2</sup> She thus limits ancestral deities to human personalities alone This is however against the general spirit of the tradition of the Meeteis The attribution of the term deities to Pakhangba, Nongpok Ningthou and Poireiton is justified if we look into the tradition of the Meeteis as it is a normal feature among the Meeteis to regard even one's own parents as Laïs Here we can make a reference to Dr Radhakrishnan who writes that father and mother and spiritual guides are also devas<sup>3</sup> As Parratt says, the above mentioned personalities had their human existence at some point of time. But because of their divine dispositions and qualities they were regarded as gods by people. Historically they were the founding fathers of some of the important yek of the Meeteis, Pakhangba of the Ningthouja or Mangang, Nongpok Ningthou of the earlier

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1. *Leithak Leikhalon*, pp. 77-79

2. *Parratt, S.N., Religion of Manipur*, p 9

3: *Radhakrishnan, S., Indian Philosophy*, Vol I, p 72

Angoms, and Poireiton of the Luwangs.<sup>1</sup> Pakhangba as referred to here is Nongtalai Pakhangba, the historic figure, the unifier of the Meeteis, the first ruling king in the historic age. Chentlarel Kumbaba writes, Nongtalai reigned 45 years before the Saka era.<sup>2</sup> Nongpok Ningthou, according to the traditional legend, is the divine personality who drained away the flood water in an age much earlier than the era of Nongtalai Pakhangba. He is addressed as belonging to the Angom yek (old). In Kangbalon there is reference to Nongpok Ningthou as a divine being who is but the Supreme God, Saree, Lainingthou Sanamahi, in a different time order.<sup>3</sup> Poireiton also is the founding ancestor of the Luwang and a contemporary of Nongtalai. Legends say that Nongtalai and Poireiton fought for the throne of Kanglei. In the free open combat Nongtalai defeated Poireiton and got the throne.<sup>4</sup> Nongtalai subsequently married a woman of Poireiton's group, according to some accounts Poireiton's sister, Laisna (=Lai sana golden precious goddess), thus cementing the relationship between himself and his rival. This Poireiton is known as Poireiton of the foot hill (Chingkhong Poireiton). In many puyas he is described as an immigrant. Poireiton who thus became the brother-in-law of Nongtalai, the ruling king of Kangleipung (the present Imphal valley) became the ancestor of the Luwang yek.<sup>5</sup> Apart from this, the contribution of Poireiton to the growth and development of the

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1. Singh, R.K.S., *Satjal*, p. 35. Pakhangba as referred to in this page is not Konjil Tukthaba Pakhangba, son of Salai-lai or Guru Sidaba, who is traditionally taken to be the original Pakhangba—a title meaning the one who knows his father, i.e. the one who has the knowledge of the beginning and end of all the Universe.
  2. *Cheitharon of Kumbaba* p. 1.
  3. *Kangbalon* pp. 8-9.
  4. Singh, R.K.S. *op cit* p. 35.
  5. Singh, Y.B., *Leithak Leikhalon*, p. 79.

Meetei nation is very great. He has been revered as Ibudhous Poireiton (grandpa Poireiton). It is said that he came to this land in search of a place free from diseases and death. He came with fire of his own and it is preserved still at Andro. This fire of Poireiton is still reckoned by the Meeteis as the Migration Fire of Poireiton (Poireitongi Khunthok Mei). In the later days many legends have grown up about the sacred fire and Poireiton. But besides these old personalities who had attained the order of the divine and were revered as important deities, there are other younger human personalities in the later age who also have been deified. Instances of these are Mungyamba, Khagemba, Khunjaoba, Apoinana Macha Maichou, Yiu Khongnangthaba, Khaidem Temba etc. Mungyamba is the father of king Khagemba. He reigned in the land in the year 1562-1597 A.D. In the year 1576 A.D. Piyangu, the king of China sent a giant man named Maydana to king Mungyamba. This Maydana was killed by Mungyamba with the help of the divine weapon Thang Khabomba (big sword with broad edge) and Ta Kangsunaba (the divine spear).<sup>1</sup> Wakoklon Hilel Thilel Salai Amailon Pukok Puya again says that Mungyamba got the weapons after deep meditation at Paotak Hithen (the place where one can get divine message), on the advice of the celestial forefathers.<sup>2</sup> The book, it appears, emphasises the moral significance of the divine weapons in the sense that Mungyamba a normal human being who ordinarily would not be able to defeat a giant had been strengthened morally and spiritually to control an evil initiated from the lower portion of the body (which is represented here by Maydana, the giant man from China which the Manipuris call Khagi). Now this Mungyamba who was king of this land had been deified. Not only Mungyamba, his son Khagemba (1597-1652) and also his grand son Khunjaoba (1652-1666) have been deified. Yiu Khongnangthaba, Apoinana Macha, Khaidem Temba etc. are all great Mai-

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1. Singh R.K.S., *op cit* p. 64

2. Wakoklon pp. 1,58.

chous who are considered by the Meeteis to be divine in character. They are also revered as deities. Thus according to the tradition of the Meeteis human personalities having divine dispositions are revered as Umanglais. Among the females also Konthoujam Lairembi, Langjing Lairembi, Pitanga and Phou Oibi were all human beings, but had been deified and revered as important deities of the Meeteis. As stated earlier the Meetei Umang Laïs are not necessarily forest deities. Most of them are ancestors of the people in this land having human existence at some point of time.

In a way the Meetei house is a temple of so many important deities. Of them the important ones include Laininthou Sanamahî, Lemalel Sidabi, Phunga (the Fire place), Imoinu Ahong Achaobi, Salalel, Thongalel etc. Of them the most revered are Sanamahî and Lemalel. They have been regarded as household deities in view of their having a definite place in a Meetei house which has either seven or nine chambers. (The chamber plan of a Meetei house is shown in the Appendix).

Laininthou Sanamahî is the most revered deity. Each dwelling house of the Meeteis has a place for this deity in the south-western corner. While worship of this deity daily by the housewives at the sun-set is a normal routine affair, this Laininthou Sanamahî is worshipped by the Meeteis at critical hours of their life, and also on the new year, i.e., on the day of cheiraoba.

'Sanamahî' literally means 'liquid gold'. This has led some writers to identify Sanamahî with the Sun god.<sup>1</sup> He symbolises the essence of life. Though he is regarded as a household deity now, he was, in earlier times, worshipped in public. There are references to ritual drinking and feasting before Sanamahî in the royal chronicles.<sup>2</sup> When

1. Singh, K.B. *Traces of Pre-Hinduism in Meetei Society*. Folk Lovh 5. p. 203
2. Cheltharol Kumbaba pp. 102, 118, 944.

Salailel declared that he would appoint as King the brother who returned first after circuiting the world, Sanamahı started off from the royal compound but his brother Pakhangba, on the advice of his mother Leimarel, circumambulated his father's throne seven times and bowed to him. When Sanamahı returned he found Pakhangba on the throne and decided to fight his brother. But Pakhangba was frightened and took refuge among seven goddesses ( Lai nurah ) who surrounded him and protected him from the wrath of Sanamahı. The frustrated Sanamahı then began to destroy the world. At this Salailel appeared and revealed to Sanamahı that he was not his son but the Supreme God. With this revelation Sanamahı was pacified. Salailel told him that he would remain in every being as the indwelling spirit, that he would remain in every house as the sole guardian deity of all the living beings in the house. His place was preserved at the South-Western chamber of the house. Leimarel was asked to be with Sanamahı on the left side of the house. It is believed that Salailel occupied the chamber directly facing the chamber of Leimarel.

The main offerings to Sanamahı as a household deity include articles which are completely raw. Nothing cooked or burnt in the fire is offered to this deity still today. As has been said earlier, people pray to this deity daily after sunset. Over and above this, at critical hours of their life, and also annually on the first day of the year, i.e., on the day of Cheiraoba all the items of the day's meal, before they are cooked, were offered to this deity. The divine seat, and the cloths and articles are arranged for the coming year by replacing the old ones. This is normally done by the eldest male member in the family after taking bath and wearing clean cloths.

As to Sanamahı and his significance in the Meetei life S. N. Parratt observes 'it is most significant that the name does not occur in the Chertharol Kumbaba until the time of



Garib Niwaz, when Vaishnavism already had a strong hold in the land.'<sup>1</sup> She further observes that 'it is strange that so important a deity as Sanamahī is not mentioned frequently in the earlier part of the Cheitharol Kumbaba. It is hardly likely that he was introduced only in the reign of Garib Niwaz as a new god; Sanamahī is such an important deity to the Meiteis that it is impossible that he could be of only comparatively recent origin—he must have been connected with the Meiteis from the beginning. Moreover if Sanamahī had been newly introduced at the time of Garib Niwaz the chronicles would surely contain some mention of his introduction.'<sup>2</sup> About this silence in the chronicles Parratt observes 'The most likely is that since Sanamahī was explicitly a household god he did not play any important part in the state affairs which Cheitharol Kumbaba largely describes.'<sup>3</sup> She also gives another explanation of the silence of the records about Sanamahī. According to her, as suggested by the editor of the Cheitharol Kumbaba, Sanamahī was formerly known under different names as Taibang Khaiba, Laiwa Haiba etc.<sup>4</sup> The stand of Parratt regarding Sanamahī as a deity of no comparatively recent origin and as associated with this community from the earliest beginning, is correct in view of the old tradition and religious practice of the Meiteis. According to Kangbarol, the worship of Lord Sanamahī had been introduced by king Kangba at the very beginning of human habitation in this land. Thus worship of Sanamahī is very ancient. This view has support from the present chronicle itself as in the chronicle Cheitharol Kumbaba on page 9 there is the mention of the loss of the original chronicle and its being rewritten at the time of king Bhagyachandra who was a devout Hindu King, and who consolidated the Hindu hold in this state. The sequence of mentioning the loss of the original Kumbaba is more doubtful. Page 9

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1 Parratt, *S N Religion of Manipur* p 18 2 Ibid, p 19

3 Ibid 4 Cheitharol Kumbaba, pp 9, 121-122

normally deals with the events that took place in the reign of King Punshuba (1404—1432 A D) But it is this page that contains the statement that loss of the original chronicle was reported by Bhagyachandra to his uncle Anantasa and arrangement for its rewriting was made. This loss of the original chronicle and its being rewritten in the time of King Bhagyachandra in 1780 A D, and the reporting of the same in page 9 of the said rewritten chronicle leaves a wide room for doubt regarding manipulation of the chronicle for the period before the conversion of the Meeteis into Hinduism.<sup>1</sup>

The worship of Sanamah is found among the Lois. They offered sacrifices of various items including pigs, ducks and fowls, besides rice and fruits, to the deity and made good meals from the offerings. Sanamah also had a place in the Lura festival of the Tangkhuls which takes just before the sowing season. He is worshipped by the Purums to obtain health and prosperity "Fowls are sacrificed to him by being strangled by the householder while the Maiba utters prayers and formulae. The bird is cooked and placed together with boiled rice before the god. The position of the leg of the bird at death is used to foretell the future of the sacrifice". Among the Kabuis also there is the worship of this deity in the name of Kachinkalai (the God at the corner of the house).

Another important household deity is Leimalel who is taken to be the supreme divine mother. According to some, Leimalel is the divine consort of Salalel, the supreme divine father while according to some others she is described as the spouse of Atiya Guru Sidba. In this connection Salalel is identified by some with Atiya Guru Sidaba. There is again another version of the identification of Salalel or Atiya Sidaba with the infinite heaven above, and of Leimalel with Malem (Mother Earth) who nurses and nourishes every living being. She is also regarded as

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1. *Cheitharol Kumbaba* pp. 9, 121—122

2. *Purratt, S.N., op cit*, p 24.

an associate of Lainingthou Sanamah. Leimalel has a place in the Meetei house near the northern wall in the middle chamber. There at her place is kept a sacred pot of water always filled. It is wrapped in a sacred thin cloth, with a lid at the top. She is also worshipped at critical hours of life and also compulsorily every year on the day of Cheraba. Besides her being a household deity, she has a deeper role in the Meetei Khunai as manifesting herself as divine ladies working for the benefit of mankind. Every female deity is considered to be her manifestation in a way or other. For this reason she is addressed as Langon Yambi Ima (the divine mother who manifests herself in many deities). She is Lal Leima (the goddess of wealth), She is Phou-Oibi (the goddess of granary) while in the barn, She is Ngareima (the goddess of fish) while in the fish yard, She is Ireima (goddess of water), She is Lan Leima (the goddess of war) in the battle field, in the salt mine she is Thumleima (the goddess of salt), in industries and crafts she is Shil Leima (the goddess of industries and crafts), She is Heepokpi, Yaipokpi, Heeleima, Yaileima, Heekubi, Yaikubi, Yaiana—the seven divine ladies.<sup>1</sup>

The Meeteis considered her stay in the house to be due to the advice of Salalel, the Lord of the living beings. Dr. Parratt says, 'This was a punishment to her for her partiality to Pakhangba in advising him to walk around the Guru's throne and bow down in order to obtain the succession.'<sup>2</sup> (The word Guru here means Salalel Sidaba or Atiya Sidaba). In the Meetei house she is the Leimalel Sidabi who is venerated by all in the family.

The third place of religious significance in the Meetei house is the Phunga-Lairu. Phunga means 'Fire place' which is in the heart of every Meetei house in the centre of the middle chamber. This is an indication of the worship of Fire

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1. Budhichandra, Y, *Imoinu Ahongbi Tunngafam*, p. 25.

2. Parratt, S.N., *op cit.*, p. 25

by the Meeteis. Fire worship is not uncommon elsewhere. The Hindus, the ancient Greeks, the Persians, the Romans, all of them worshipped and preserved Fire at their homes. When the fire is worshipped and preserved at their respective homes, the Meeteis call it Phunga Mei. In the Fire place there are three stones, one in the right west, the other two in a triangular form- in the north-east and south east. These three stones are considered to be representing the three great times of the day ( which again represents the Nong, the Supreme Lord). The stone on the north-east is considered to be representing Mangang, that on the south-east, Luwang and that on the west, Khuman. Mangang here represents sun rise , Luwang, noon, and Khuman, the Sun set and the night <sup>1</sup> The Fire in the Phunga is addressed by the Meeteis as 'Meitreng Arabana Yoimayai Mahut Sinna Mei' <sup>2</sup> Meitreng Araba means the burning fire unimpeded by smokes , Yoimayai is a word by which the Meeteis know the Sun , Mahut Sinba means 'to substitute'. Thus the words collectively mean that the burning fire in the Phunga (fire place) substitutes the Sun. The sun which is taken to be representing the supreme God for the world of the living beings is thus worshipped in the Meetei Phunga. The fire place is thus taken to be of supreme importance to the Meeteis, and hence called Phunga Lairu the fire place where the important deities are worshipped. No Meeteis allow anybody to take out fire from their home phunga at odd times of the day. This practice is still in use in the Meetei community. The traditional belief is that the Supreme Lord Tengbanba Mapu is worshipped in the main Phunga, and mainly for this reason the place is called Phunga Lairu. Dr Parratt gives a misleading explanation of Phunga Lairu. She is right in so far as she holds that Phunga Lairu is a place, rather than a person. But she says, "It consisted of a small hole situated to the

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1. Sharma, A , *Meitei Kirtan* p. 98

2. *Ibid*, pp 92,101

west of the fire hearth in which there was an earthen pot. The hollow was covered with a clay roof, in the centre of which has a small hole. Through this offerings were dropped into the pot."<sup>1</sup> Dr Parratt suffers from some confusion here for she is describing another deity Imoinu Ahong Achaubi who is taken to be another form of Leimalel Sıdabi, the Supreme Pi (mother) Just like Laxmi of the Hindus, this Imoinu is taken to be ever resourceful, giving wealth and prosperity to mankind. The Meeteis have many traditional legends about this deity Imoinu in which she was shown as having human appearance and residing in the place near the fire hearth. Offerings are made to her everyday. But the 12th day of the month of Wakching is the day for her worship. Imoinu is taken by the Meeteis to be the controller and regulator of the good conduct and behaviour of human being.<sup>2</sup> Parratt confused the worship of Imoinu with the worship of Fire, Imoinu finds a place near Phunga. To identify the two would be wrong.

From what is said above it is evident that the importance of Sanamahı and Pakhangba in the religious life of the Meeteis is very great. The true nature of the Supreme God Tengbanba Mapu is revealed in and through them. Apart from his being a household deity Sanamahı as Khoyum Ashıba is also regarded as the efficient cause of the universe. He is the inner essence of everything. His cosmic body is described in a passage thus:

'Ashıba says, 'The earth is created by me. None can snatch it from me. All the four corners are borne by me. I wear the feather of the peacock. The upper portion of my abdomen is the heaven, my back is the earth, my bones are the iron, my intestines are the great rivers, Iril and Thoubal. My muscles become the great mountain, Sannaching, my eyes are the sun and the moon. While creating the earth

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1 Parratt, S. N, *op cit*, p. 27

2. Budhuchandro, Y, *Imcinu Ahongbigı Tungnafam*, p. 26

in the infinite space I am Leiranglen Takhatpa and also Nongnanglen Apongba . My colour is fiery My teeth are golden. My odour is that of Lotus My right hand holds gold, the left silver The heavenly gods form my canopy while the earthly deities constitute my golden seat. I am alone in the infinite darkness ''<sup>1</sup>

The passage reminds one of the Viswarupa of the Supreme Lord in the Bhagavad-Gita. The whole universe of things and beings are in Ashiba (Lainingthou Sanamah) He creates it and contains it. He maintains it and destroys it. While Sanamah is the inner essence in all beings, Pakhangba means the one who knows his Father, i.e., the Supreme God, and thus represents the highest order of wisdom It is said that the Lord Tengbanba Mapu entered into the womb of the Mother as Sanamah and came out from the womb as Pakhangba,<sup>2</sup>. Thus the entire divine scheme is understood in terms of actualization of the potential. Sanamah symbolises the potential essence and Pakhangba symbolises the manifest aspect of the Supreme Lord.

Dr S N. Parratt observes that Pakhangba may be regarded as the first king of the land, who has been later magnified into a god by later generations She further observes that his connection with the snake is less certain and that it may be a vestige of totemistic beliefs She points out that perhaps it may be a part of the widespread naga beliefs of North India She observes that the snake beliefs have been incorporated into a tribal religion of the Ningthoujas, and thus have come to be associated with their tribal ancestral deity. She stresses that the worship of Pakhangba remains a prerogative of the Ningthoujas, often intimately associated with the throne. No member of another yek is allowed to worship him, and for a prince doing so necessarily implies an attempt on the throne \*

1. *Lenthak Leikhalon*, p. 36

2. *Ibid.*, p. 107

3. *Parratt, S N. op. cit p. 13*

The above views of Parratt on Pakhangba in line with the opinion of Dr. Chatterji and Hodson throw light on different aspects of the Meetei life.<sup>1</sup> However, it appears that she is taking Nongtalai Pakhangba, the first ruling king of the land in the historic age, to be the original ancient Konchin Tukthaba/Tingthokpa Pakhangba of the puyas and traditional beliefs. This has created a serious trouble in the proper understanding of Pakhangba. Nongtalai had been revered by the people of his time as divine Pakhangba. The writings of Cheitharol Kumbaba etc. try to show that he is divine. Nongtalai himself said that he was god by day and human by night.<sup>2</sup> It is because of Nongtalai's divine ability to unify the different small groups of people in this land, and establish the proper foundation of the Meetei nation, that people of his time took him to be Pakhangba, the divine ancestor of the traditional legends. As he was found possessing the divine qualities of Konchin Tingthokpa Pakhangba, the Ruling Deity, he was taken to be an incarnation of divine Pakhangba and venerated as such by the later generations. Dr. S.N. Parratt's characterisation of Pakhangba in three ways '(i) as a man, the unifier of the Meeteis; (ii) as a deity, brother of Sanamahi and son of Ativa Guru Sidaba, (iii) as a snake,'<sup>3</sup> makes a confusion as to whether Pakhangba is just a title won by a single personality or by many personalities at different times. In fact Pakhangba is not a person but a title. There were many personalities, divine and human, who won the title Pakhangba and were venerated as the original Pakhangba himself, they being taken as his incarnations at different times. On the line

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1 of. Chatterjee, S K, 'Kirata jana Kriti' Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal, Hodson, T, *The Meiteis*, p 99

2. Cheitharol Kumbaba, p. 1

3. Parratt, S.N. op. cit., p 10

of personalities who won the title Pakhangba, Nongtalai was the last. He reigned in 34 A.D. as the first king of the historic age<sup>1</sup> Following the tradition of Nongtalai the rulers of this land were taken to be in possession of divine qualities, and were often addressed as Lainingthou (Divine king). But this tradition has been lost since the time of Pamheiba Garib-Niwaz) who initiated the conversion of the people forcibly into Hinduism

From the discussion made above it is clear that Pakhangba is not a person, divine or human, but a title—an attribute possessed by the one, divine or human, who knows the secrets of the Ultimate background of the Universe of things and beings. The Meeteis believe that Sanamahi is the potential essence, and Pakhangba is the actualisation of it. This is in a way the metaphysical significance of the two personalities of the Meetei pantheon. It is in this sense that Sanamahi is taken as the elder, and Pakhangba as the younger brother, both being the sons of Salailai Sidaba who is but the manifestation of the Supreme God. This shows that Sanamahi and Pakhangba are but two aspects of the self-same reality. Sanamahi is the inner aspect while Pakhangba is the outer aspect of life. The child in the womb of the Mother is taken to be Sanamahi by the Meetei traditional belief, but when the child is born, i.e., when he comes out from the womb of the Mother, he becomes a member of the living world and is Pakhangba.

Thus in the religion of the Meeteis Sanamahi becomes the presiding deity, having his place in every home and seated within each being as the main principle of life (Thawailai—the Supreme soul in the being.), while Pakhangba becomes the ruling deity the divine ruler having perfect knowledge of the secrets of the universe and its Author. Metaphysically Sanamahi remains as the inner essence of all things and beings, while Pakhangba is the externalisation of that essence.

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1. *Cheitharol Kumbaba*, p. 1



The demands of the cultus as well as the growth of reflection prompted the early Meeteis to recognise all the Lais to be only the shifting forms of the One and real divinity. Anthropomorphic polytheism cannot be taken as the keynote of their religious philosophy. The concept of Tengbanba Mapu represents the High God who is the Soul of the Universe, the Guardian of the Cosmos. All the Lais are His manifestations. Thus there is no crude monotheism in the Meetei Puyas. The ancient people longed for a power above on which they could depend. The different Lais were the reflections of the growing wants and needs of the people, but none of them answered to the highest conception of the Deity. The Meetei mind craving for the Infinite arrived at the notion of Atiya Sidaba<sup>1</sup> whose association with the sky represented the transcendence of the finite. Atiya Sidaba created through a demiurge called Kodin which emanated from Him.<sup>2</sup> He is not a shadowy Absolute but a determinate Being in determinate relations to the world and man. The restless mind of the early Meeteis was satisfied with the conception of Tengbanba Mapu, the transcendent ground of the universe. In contrast to the mutability and decay and disappearance which are the doom of all created things and beings including the different Lais, the religious thought of the Meeteis has striven to rise to the idea of a Being who is lifted high above the flux of time.

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1. *Iit. Sky Immortal*

2. *cf. Leithak Leithakrol.*

## CHAPTER—III

### WORLD

Man has traversed a long way from a life of brutish ignorance to a fully articulated rational self-consciousness. The Godward movement of the early Meeteis is a stage in the long course of religious experience of humanity. They not only worshipped gods but also reflected on the mysteries of the world. Their cosmological speculations were coloured by mythical assumptions. What is significant in this primitive human endeavour is not the answer they have but their search for the World-Ground. The Meeteis believed that the universe with its contents, living and non-living had its origin in the Supreme God, Tengbanba Mapu. How from the One emerged the changing world of multiplicity is described in many puyas.

Leithak Leikhalon is believed to have been composed during the reign of Nongtalai in the first century and was edited, with minor additions, by the great Maichou Louremba Khongnangthaba in the time of king Khagemba (1597-1652). The book is explicitly cosmological in nature though it describes different features of history and culture of the land and its people. As the title of the Puya indicates, Leithak Leikhalon means the book on the creation of heaven (Leithak) and earth (Leikha). The main purpose of the book is to give an account of the creation of heaven and earth as manifestations of the Supreme Being, called here by the name of Tengbanba Mapu.

According to the Meeteis, there are two great time orders - the hangko and the chak. The hangko age is the age of gods during which primal elements emanated from the ultimate substratum. It has four divisions: ko, thoi, poi and tayo. These involved countless number of years during which the stage was set for the emergence of our world. After the

hangko comes the chak, the human age. It has also four divisions : hayi, haya, Khunung and langba (konna) The earliest beginning of the hayi chak 'is treated as a transitional stage when gods and men were living together. It is believed that at the end of the langba chak the universe is dissolved. All the manifested deities and the primal elements are consumed by the fire of langba. Nothing remains except Atingkok ( Formless Boundless Expanse ) and Amamba (Darkness). The universe becomes a mere naught, darkness prevails everywhere. From this state of nothingness the will of Tengbanba Mapu brings about new creation <sup>1</sup>

According to Leithak Leikhalon Puya, there is but one Being, Tengbanba Mapu, raised high above all the conditions and limitations of time and change. He is the ground, guide and goal of the universe. From him all flows out. To him all returns. Creation and dissolution go on in a repeating series. At the time of dissolution all the nine layers of earth, nine orders of heaven and all gods disappear into the original potential naught filled with darkness. This primeval dark ground is explained in terms of Atingkok and Amamba who are the manifestations of the Supreme Lord. From the great desire of Tengbanba Mapu to create the universe, came forth the primal sound *Hung*. There then appeared a halo all around like an encircling rainbow. This round halo is the main root. The Supreme Lord is the sheath covering all. Atingkok is the germinating fibre of the root. The point of germination is called Sannaching (the divine mount). Within it lies Amamba, the darkness. Within this Amamba, still Atingkok remains and within Atingkok lies the Lord. As Tengbanba Mapu is both high above and below, He is said to be the all-embracing infinite.<sup>2</sup>

That at the beginning the earth was under water is clearly stated in the Puya. Atingkok, the vast boundless

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1. Singh, O. Bhageshwar, *Ningthourel Seirong*, pp. 1-5 and also *Leithak Leikhalon* Pages 3-4.

2. *Leithak Leikhalon*, pp 46

expanse is the womb in which all find place in different forms changing in the infinite course of time. Within it there is Amamba. Within Amamba there is Air, within Air there is Cloud, within the Cloud, there is Water and within Water there is the Earth.<sup>1</sup> This earth which was under water was (lifted by the deity Ashiba by means of different species of animals like owl, kopi (an insect), tortoise, fish etc.—all of which are his own manifestations. The different layers were borne by different creatures. The nine orders of heaven were also created by Ashiba. On the highest order there is Konkhe) Atamba, the place of the deity Nunglanglen Akhuba. Above the highest level of heaven shines the Supreme Lord by his own light. He is present in the inmost layer of the earth also.<sup>2</sup> It was a great achievement of the ancient Meetei thinkers to arrive at the notion of the Indeterminate in form of Atingkok-Amamba. In their search for the ground of all changing things they looked upon the Indeterminate as the immediate source of the determinate.

The primal sound 'Hung' initiated the emanation of the primal deities of creation and also of the primal elements that would ultimately mature into the present universe of things and beings. Atingkok and Amamba, as the eternal manifestations of Tengbanba Mapu served as the ultimate background of creation. Atingkok controlled and directed the whole course of creation. Atiya Sidaba and Ashiba were the main architects, Konjin Tingthokpa was the deity trying to disturb creation. Nongthangleima was the goddess of light and thunder distracting Konjin from his disturbing activities. Tengbanba Mapu called Atiya Sidaba from within Atingkok and asked Atingkok to take Atiya Sidaba down to create the universe. Amamba which was with Atingkok took Atiya down and called forth Taopiloinai. Taopiloinai means the conglomeration of all the elements floating in the

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1. *Ibid*, pp 11-12

2. *Ibid*., pp. 11-15

vast infinite expanse and is considered to be the Supreme Mother. She appeared as the great imperishable black boulder (Nungmu Tumda Mangdaba). Atingkok sat on it and wedded with Nungmu. Atiya who emanated from Atingkok was characterized by primal clouds. Taopiloinai was characterized by Air. The union of Atingkok and Taopiloinai resulted in the manifestation of Ongthi. He was Ashiba, characterized by water and symbolized by *A*. The heat generated was Konchin Tingthokpa. He was Fire and symbolized by *Ka*. Then came different stars and seven divine girls.

Atingkok asked Atiya Sidaba to create the world. Atiya sitting on his own breath called forth Ashiba addressing him as *A*, and Ashiba came forth as Infinite Water (Ishing Tarang). Konchin Tingthokpa also was called out, addressed as *Ka*, and he appeared as Fire. Atiya Sidaba went up to Atingkok to ask as to how the earth would be created. He bowed down to Atingkok and asked him to show his worth. Atingkok opened his mouth and showed all lying within Him. The sun, the moon, the Pole star and other stars, galaxies, Fire, Water, Air and all others were shown to Atiya who was simply afraid to see all these. Atiya requested Atingkok to close His mouth. Atiya wished to take out all and threw himself within Atingkok. He tried to drive out all the things by uttering HOIROU (the divine song) : *Ahei He Hoirou Hoirou Nakese*. Hearing this song Atingkok opened His mouth and all the elements came out as driven by Atiya. Atingkok sang '*Ahei He Heliya Heliya Heiyanakese*'. The song of the elements within was '*Ha Hei Hei Ha Ha Ha. Hoi Hoi Ha Ha Ha Herin Linla Herinla Herinla, Hayute Khalatte Heiyase Tahou Hou He Hou Haya Naketa*'. This is a song to express happiness in coming out. All these songs are unintelligible. But they are still sung in the celebrated Lai Harao-ba festival of the Meeteis.<sup>1</sup>

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1. *Ibid*, pp 12—30

The earliest Meetei thinkers saw the things of nature with such intensity of feeling and force of imagination that the whole universe became an embodiment of the creator god Ashiba. Uttering the divine hymn '*Ungser*' Ashiba spread his body. His belly became the heaven and his back the earth. His two eyes became the sun and the moon. His blood became water; his breath, air; his bile, fire. His hair became trees and plants. Thus Ashiba is the whole cosmos.<sup>1</sup>

One important feature of the Meetei concept of creation is its cyclic character. All things including gods will be consumed by Time which is but a representation of the Supreme Lord. What will remain is Atingkok, the vast expanse filled with darkness (Amamba). Creation begins afresh from this state of nothingness with infinite potentiality. It is ultimately due to the Supreme God, Tengbanba Mapu. The whole creation is from Him, in Him, and for Him. It ends in Him and it begins with Him. In a way, through His own creation He realises Himself, and that is the very purpose of creation. At the top there is the Supreme Lord of the Universe within whom there is the Boundless, Formless Expanse, filled always with supreme Darkness in which there is the Nongshit (the Air), the life of the whole creation which has Leichin (the cloud),- and the interaction between the Air and the Cloud has resulted in the coming forth of water, within which there is the Earth where the living beings come into existence. Like other ancient people the Meeteis explained the whole creation in terms of gods and goddess. Their legends are the attempts of the primitive minds to grasp the truth.

Wakoklon Hilel Thilel Salai Amailol Pakok Puya was written by the great Maichou Apot—Nana in the time of

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1. *Ibid*, p. 36

of king Mungyamba (1562-1597 A. D.). This is again copied by Ghauba in the time of king Pamheiba ( 1709-1748 A. D. ). This Puya is also a treatise on the creation of earth and heaven, besides its other features.

The puya writes about the beginning of the manifestations from the Supreme God, Tengpanba Mapu (known here as Ipungloinapa Apakpa-the Ultimate Infinite Expanse). When there was nothing but this Boundless, Formless Expanse-the Talang, when there was no fire, water, air sun, or moon, or when there was neither light nor darkness, when there was nothing but He and He alone as Talang Malang ( the state in which nothing definite was formed and manifested), the Supreme God, Ipung Loinapa Apakpa wished to create the Earth ( Malem ) and Heaven ( Nongthou) He then concentrated within Himself to give forth Malem (Earth) and Leisa (the land surface) In the process there came forth Kampt (Fire), Lacha (Water), Malangpa (Air) which contributed to the formation of Malem (earth) and Nongthou (Heaven). Thus came the sun, the moon, the stars and planets and all those that shine in the bright heaven The important ones are the immortal Pole star (Thawaimichak Pi Malik Sitapa); the morning star (Sachik), the evening star (Thaba', Khongchom Nupi, Sachung Til Heipa, Salangka, Okpuloi, Taohuileng, the clouds, the rainbow, the thunder, the galaxy of seven stars. These are all that shine and have a place in the heaven Not only these shining things in the heaven and the primal elements of the Universe, the Supreme Being had manifested Himself into great divinities They are Nongpok Chingkhel Apanba, Awangpa Koupalu, Thangching Koilel Lai Sitapa, Khana Chaopa Wangpulel, Ilai Pulel Puling Lai Pangkalpa, Salailel Sitapa Konsen Tulel Sengpa Sanamah, Mee-Khaloupa and Konchin Tukthaba Iputhou Pakhangpa. This book does not give much of the details of the creation except in the above broad outlines. The presentation however may be little different from the Leithak Leikhalon Puya.

But this Puya also speaks of God to be the Ultimate Author of the Universe of things and beings. The process of manifestation to bring forth the Universe begins from God when He was alone as the Supreme Infinite Expanse. This process, as told in this book, is just the same as found in Leithak Leikhalon Puya. There also the Tengpanba Mapu with Atingkok and Amamba starts the process of manifestation, of actualisation into the Universe of things and beings. Atingkok and Amamba represented the state when there was nothing but the Infinite Expanse pervaded all through by Intense Darkness. Salalel in this book has been identified by some with Atiya Sidaba while Konsen Tulei Sengpa Sanamahi with Ashiba, the main architect of the whole creation of heaven and earth. Konchin Tingthokpa of Leithak Leikhalon has been identified with Konchin Tukthaba in this book. Regarding the order of manifestations also the book agrees with the Leithak Leikhalon. First there manifested from the Supreme Being, Fire, then Water, then Air, then the sun, the moon, the stars and planets in the bright open sky, and finally the earth. In this book the earth is shown as lifted from the depth of Water. Just as in Leithak Leikhalon, here also the whole creation is due to the Supreme wish of God. Otherwise there is no creation and no manifestation, but the primal state characterised by the Boundless Expanse. Thus here also creation is for Him, in Him and from Him. It begins with Him and ends in Him,

The book Pudil has similar views with Leithak Leikhalon regarding creation of the Universe. Popsiang (also called Pombilang) an important Puya of the Meeteis gives an account of creation. It was written by Thengra Maichou (contemporary of Louremba Khongnangthaba Maichou) before the conversion of the Meeteis into Hinduism, i. e., 1713 A D., and basing on it Pukhrambam Kala Moirangcha wrote a book entitled Leihou-Nonghou. This book speaks of the



creation of heaven and earth as narrated by Mangang Laininghal ( a personality even before the reign of Nongtalai Pakhangba , considered to be the incarnation of God) to his disciple Luwang Leikoiba.

On the query of Luwang Leikoiba regarding the creation of heaven and earth Mangang Laininghal replied, there was no world, no universe at the beginning There was but the vast Infinite Expanse Unimpeded by anything. This state was known as Tingakok which was but the Supreme Lord, Tengbanba Mapu In the Tingakok the Supreme Lord manifested like thin vapour of clouds and to create the Universe He issued forth the primal sound *Hung* Then from Him came out five primal elements of Fire, Water, Air, Heaven and Earth. In lifting the Earth from the deep bottom of Water He made ten manifestations of Himself There was first Chaora Mapal Thaba who tried to lift the earth from the water. But he failed The next manifestation was Pisatao who also failed to lift the earth The third was Nongkhomtao , the fourth was Nongyai Mari Onba : the fifth was Leikhomtao ; the sixth was Nongsaba , the seventh was Tekpi (Pig) , the eighth was Tikta (Tortoise) , the ninth was Pafal (the divine python having thousand crests) and the tenth was Sali-Yangba ( a species of white long fish ) who completed the lifting of the earth from the deep bottom of water. The surface of the earth which got dried after the lifting was called Kanglei Pung Mayoī. When the earth was lifted the heat in the open atmosphere took up a part of the said earth, and thus formed the five elements of Fire, Water, Air, Earth and Heaven.

The creation as narrated by Mangang Laininghal to Luwang Leikoiba in the book *polpilang* shows the ten manifestations of the Supreme Being in lifting the earth from the bottom of Water Though the presentation is a little different, in *Leithak Leikhalon* also there is the mention of Tortoise, Owl, Pig Elephant, Pafal Saliang Fish etc as playing their

role in the creation of the different layers of the Earth. All these things resemble in a way the mythological legends of the ten Avatars of the Hindus.

Last but not the least we can consider the view of Amam-Nonglon regarding creation of the Universe. The Amam-Nonglon view is taken out mainly from Nonglon Pathup Wachetlon left by Singtabung, son of Poireiton. Poireiton was the brother-in-law of Nongtalai Pakhangba who reigned in 34 A.D.

Amam-Nonglon view describes the whole Universe of things and beings as a play between Nong, the boundless Infinite Expanse filled with Amamba (the darkness), and Yai (the light). Nong is the Ultimate background addressed in this Puya as Lainingshing Heiyi. Nothing is known precisely about Him by human beings except that He is the Supreme Ultimate Background of all. It is in a way the Supreme Darkness which signifies the unknown and unmanifest character of the Supreme Reality. He alone was there at the beginning. Yai, the light was there only within the infinite expanse called Nong. That is to say, Yai was within Nong, Light was within Darkness. The coming out of Yai from Nong resulted in the being of the Universe, and it is for this reason that the Universe is said to be a play between Nong and Yai. About Nong there can be no perfect human knowledge. It is only when Yai comes out from the background of Darkness as distinct Light that there is manifestation and knowledge. That there is the universe of things and beings means that there is the Yai coming out from Nong. According to this view the sun and the moon are in the manifest Universe as they are objects giving light, the Yai. But ordinarily only the sun belongs to the Yai (Light) while the moon which does not emit light by itself is considered to be belonging to Nong-the Amamba (Darkness). Moon has light only when the sun shines on it. Otherwise it is in Darkness, the Nong. Thus Nong is cold, calm and

peaceful while Yai as Light is hot and active. The Puya says that the sun and moon are both in the world of manifestation, the world being manifested by their light. But of the two also, the sun is light while the moon is darkness. Besides, the Lainingshing Heiyi is the principle that determines the whole course of the Universe just as the Rta. of the Rg. Veda controls and regulates the whole course of the Universe. The Lainingshing Heiyi is above all beings, human or divine. The Fire, Water, Air, the Earth and the Heaven and all other deities obey him. Lainingshing is thus the counterpart of the Rta of the Rg. Veda. About the nature of the Rta Dr. Radhakrishnan says, "Rta originally meant the established route of the world, the sun, moon, and stars morning and evening, day and night." <sup>1</sup> He further says, "the dawn follows the path of Rta, the right path, as if she knew them before. She never oversteps the regions. The sun follows the path of Rta. The whole Universe is founded on Rta and moves in it" <sup>2</sup> Even the gods are to obey the course as determined by Rta.

This view of Amam-Nonglon as enunciated in Nonglon Pathup Wachetlon has a different style of presentation regarding the creation of the Universe. However the concept of Nong (the darkness) can be reconciled with Tengbanba Mapu whose eternal manifestations are Atingkok- the boundless Expanse and Amamba, the Darkness. Atingkok with Amamba is the ultimate background of all things, divine and human. In fact the Amam-Nonglon view is the meaning and substance of all the theories of creation of the Meetei puyas. The whole creation has been due to the Supreme God. It begins with Him; it ends in Him; it is for Him. All creation is from a state of formless, boundless Darkness. From the said darkness there comes up Light that shines and manifests, and also the primal elements of Fire, Water, Air, Heaven

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1. Radhakrishnan, S., *Indian Philosophy*, Vol I, p 79

2. *Ibid.*

with all the shining things like the stars and planets, the sun and the moon.

The Meeter theory of creation can be appreciated better if it is compared with the Vedic theory of creation. There are two views of creation in the Vedic hymns. The first is creation of the world by an Omnipotent God out of pre-existent matter. The second is creation of the World by God out of His own nature without any pre-existent matter. These two views on further analysis will become one when there comes the question, wherefrom does the creating god come? Quoting the references to Hiranvagarbha by Manu Dr. Radhakrishnan writes, "Hiranyagarbha arose in the beginning from the great water which pervaded the Universe. He evolved the beautiful world from the Shapeless chaos which was all that existed"<sup>1</sup>. As to the further query "how did it happen that the chaos produced Hiranyagarbha? What is that unknown force or law of development which led to his rise? Who is the author of the primeval waters?" Dr. Radhakrishnan writes, 'According to Manu, Harivamsa and the Puranas, God was the author of chaos. He created it by His will, and deposited a seed in it which became the golden germ in which He Himself was born as the Brahma or the Creator God. 'I am Hiranyagarbha, the Supreme Spirit Himself become manifested in the form of Hiranyagarbha' Thus the two eternally co-existent substances seem to be the evolution of the one ultimate substratum"<sup>2</sup>.

From the above it is clear that ultimately there cannot be any two views. The whole creation is simply due to the Supreme God, both the creating God Brahma or Hiranyagarbha and the shapeless chaos from which Hiranyagarbha evolved the beautiful world are but the evolution of the One Ultimate Background (Substratum). The Vedic creation has

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1. *Ibid*, p 100 2. *Ibid*.,

been well described in the Nasadiya Hymn, translation of which by Max Muller as referred to by Radhakrishnan runs as below .

"There was then neither what is nor what is not, there was no sky, nor the heaven which is beyond What covered ? Where was it, and in whose shelter ? Was the water the deep abyss (in which it lay) ?

There was no death, hence was there nothing immortal. There was no light (distinction) between night and day That One breathed by itself without breath, other than it there has been nothing

Darkness there was, in the beginning all this was a sea without light , the germ that lay covered by the husk, that One was born by the power of heat (tapas).

Love overcame it in the beginning, which was the seed springing from mind, poets having searched in their heart found by wisdom the bond of what is in what is not.

Their ray which was stretched across, was it below or was it above ? There were seed bearers, there were powers, self power below, and will above.

Who then knows, who has declared it here, from whence was born this creation ? The gods came later than this creation, who then knows whence it arose ?

He from whom this creation arose, whether he made it or did not make it, the highest seer in the highest heaven, he forsooth knows or does even he not know ?"<sup>1</sup>

Like the gifted seers of the Rg. Veda the ancient Meetei thinkers thought about the questions How was it when there was no Universe ? How was it when the Universe came into being ? How then was it after it had come into existence ? Answers to these questions are found in the diffe-

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1. *Ibid*, pp. 100-01

rent Puyas. As Atombapu Sharma elaborates the significance of the answers in the light of the Nasadiya Hymn, "Nothing was there at the beginning. All were but a Tingakok (the Infinite Expanse, boundless and shapeless); He alone was there by His own strength. He was Atingkok filled with darkness. It was but the primordial water; by the Supreme will of Atungkok to make different manifestations, all these had become. The deities came only after the creation of this Universe. The deities did not know how the Universe which was more ancient than they came into being. Therefore nobody could know and say about the details of the creation of the Universe. *Atingkok Guru Sidaba* the Supreme Lord of the Universe alone knows, He alone bears all these. But about this nobody could have a direct knowledge. If it is to be known, He alone knows. Others cannot know."<sup>1</sup>

Dr. Radhakrishnan made his assessment of the creation as found in the Nasadiya Hymn, and wrote, 'We find in this hymn a representation of the most advanced theory of creation. First of all there was no existent or non-existent. The existent in its manifested aspect was not then. We cannot on that account call it the non-existent, for it is positive being from which the whole existence arrives. The first line brings out the inadequacy of our categories. The absolute reality which is at the back of the whole world cannot be characterised by us as either existent or non-existent. The One breathed breathless by its own power. Other than that there was not anything beyond. First cause of all it is older than the whole world with the sun, moon, sky, and stars. It is beyond time, beyond space, beyond age, beyond death and immortality. We cannot express what it is except that it is. Such is the prime, unconditioned groundwork of all being.'"<sup>2</sup>

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1. *Shri Atombapu Sharma Manipur Itihas*, pp. 116-117

2. *Radhakrishnan, S., op. cit*, p. 101

As to how from the Absolute which is neither the self nor the other, but which is higher than both these and within which the oppositions develop, the world comes into being, the Nasadiya hymns say, it is by Tapas. "Tapas is just the 'rushing forth', the spontaneous 'out-growth', the projection of being into existence, the energising impulse, the innate spiritual fervour of the Absolute."<sup>1</sup> As Radhakrishnan observes, "according to this account the steps of creation, when translated into modern terms, are : (1) the Highest Absolute , (2) the bare self-consciousness, I am I, (3) the limit of self-consciousness in the form of another. This does not mean that there is a particular point at which the absolute moves out. The stages are only logically but not chronologically successive. The ego implies the non-ego and therefore cannot precede it Nor can the non-ego precede the ego. Nor can the Absolute be ever without doing tapas. The timeless whole is ever breaking out in a series of becomings, and the process will go on till the self reaffirms itself absolutely in the varied content of experience which is never going to be. So the world is always restless. The hymn tells us the how of creation, not the whence It is an explanation of the fact of creation"<sup>2</sup> It would be wrong to think that according to the Nasadiya hymn there was non-being from out of which being grew. "The first condition is not absolute non-existence, for the hymn admits the reality of the one breathing breathless by itself. It is their way of describing the absolute reality, the logical ground of the whole universe. Being and non-being, which are correlative terms cannot be applied to the One which is beyond all opposition Non-being only means whatever now visibly exists had then no distinct existence . . it is said, 'existent sprang from the non-existent'. Even here it does not mean being comes from non-being but only that distinct being comes from non-distinct being"<sup>3</sup> Purusa Sukta is another approach

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1, *Ibid* , p 102      2. *Ibid.*, p. 103    3. 16.' p. 104

of explaining the creation of the world out of the original material. According to the hymns of the Purusa Sukta the gods are the agents of creation, while the material out of which the world is made is the body of the great Purusa. The act of creation is understood as a sacrifice in which Purusa is the victim. Dr. Radhakrishnan says, "This hymn is not, however, inconsistent with the theory of creation from the One Absolute described above. The whole world even according to it is due to the self diremption of the Absolute into subject and object, Purusa and Prakriti. Only the idea is rather crudely allegorised. The Supreme reality becomes the active Purusa, for it is said 'From the Purusa Virat was born, and from Virat again Purusa' Purusa is thus the begetter and the begotten. He is the absolute as well as the Self-conscious I" <sup>1</sup>

These are the explanations regarding the creation of the world as shown by the hymns of the Vedas. The resemblance between them and the Meetei puyas is so striking that one may even doubt as to whether one is borrowed from the other. The doubt however cannot be maintained because of the brilliance of both the Vedas and the Meetei Puyas. "The Vedas are the earliest documents of the human mind that we possess" <sup>2</sup> To the Meeteis also the ancient Puyas are sacred texts which incorporate the speculations of the gifted Machous. Both have independent character and development. Had the Meeteis been influenced by the Vedic Thought there would have been a clear indication for it in the Puyas. Thus the similarities may be a matter of coincidence.

Though there is difference in language, style and presentation the theories of creation as found in the hymns of the Vedas and as revealed by the Meetei Puyas have almost the similar meaning and significance. The primal state before

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1. *Ibid.* p. 105      2. *Ibid.*, p. 63



creation as sung by the Vedic seers in their hymns, and as shown in the different puyas of the Meeteis is almost similar. It was a state in which there was neither existent in the manifested form, nor non-existent. It was a state in which there was no fire, nor water, nor air, nor the sun, nor the moon, nor the earth, nor the heaven with all the shining stars and planets. There was no death and no immortality also as all are within His infinite womb potentially without any process of manifestation. He alone was there older than the whole world. He is beyond time, beyond space beyond age, beyond death and beyond immortality. About this primal beginning the Leithak Leikhalon Puya says, all the nine orders of heaven and earth, the fire, water, air and also all the deities disappeared into the primal original potential nothingness. All are within His boundless infinite bosom filled with darkness. Darkness prevailed all through.<sup>1</sup> There was no light to make a distinction from darkness. As the Amam-Nonglon (the primal darkness and light) view of the Nonglon Pathup Wachetlon Puya clearly suggests, in the primal state there was but darkness all over and the Nong, the Supreme Being, is known by Amamba, the darkness. The emanation of the Light from Nong is just the coming into existence of the manifest world with all the shining objects, the sun, the moon and the stars (the light that has come out from the Supreme Dark background is the Yai)<sup>2</sup> Like the Tapas of the Vedas an innate spiritual impulse of Tengbanba Mapu is suggested by the Primal Creative Sound *Hung* issued forth from Him at the initial stage of creation. Just as there is the Rta in the Vedic system as the order of the world—the established route of the world, of the sun, moon and stars, morning and evening, day and night, there is the Lamingshing Heiyi of the Meetei belief as the Ultimate Principle of the Universe—determining.

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1. *Leithak Leikhalon*, p. 4

2. *Piba, A., Eeyek Sakailon*, p. 140

regulating and controlling the whole course of the manifest world. Just as Rta is the father of all, the unchanging principle underlying the shifting series of the world, the **Wainingshing Heiyi** is often regarded as the Ultimate Father of the cosmic order. The world is not a purposeless chaos but an emanation from God. This is the truth advocated both by the Vedas and by the Puyas.

The Meetei Puyas do not consider the world to be real by itself. They find the explanation of the world in a Supreme Divine will. The world is an efflux from God, a manifestation of the essence of His being. The created world, though it is distinguished from God, has nevertheless no meaning and significance apart from God. The divine immanence, however, does not deny the divine transcendence: God is the transcendent ground of the cosmological whole. By the activity of His Will He has given being to the world of things and beings. Nothing in the universe is static. Change is the law of things. Everything in the world is subject to decay and death. But God is the infinite eternal Being and as such is transcendent of the world. To the religious mind of the Meeteis, the world as an expression of the will of God is sustained by Him under a loving care. This idea has led the Meeteis to transform every house into a veritable temple. There are many household deities, the chief of whom is Ashiba or Sanamah, who occupies a corner of the house. Sanamah, as we have noted earlier, is a manifestation of the Supreme Lord of the Universe called by different names.

There is no basis for any idea of the unreality of the world in the Meetei Puyas. But the early thinkers realised the incompleteness and finitude of the world and regarded God as the ground, guide and goal of the world. Materialism was rejected. The unity postulated to explain the multiplicity was conceived as a conscious principle. The world is not a purposeless chaos but an ordered scheme of things and beings. In the fanciful and mythological accounts of creation the Puyas bring out the spiritual foundation of our world.

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## CHAPTER IV

### MAN

Reflective thinking is the special prerogative of man. The early Meeteis exhibited a remarkable development of thought in their conception of man and his place in the cosmos. All the puyas proclaim that man is not transient flesh but the immortal spirit and derives his being from God who is the ultimate Father. The Meeteis repudiate the view that destiny of man is determined by the action of blind and ruthless forces of the material world. According to them man comes into being within a world divinely ordered, a world whose interacting elements are created and sustained by God. At the beginning there was manifestation of the elements that would constitute the world and the deities who would participate in the creation of the world. Man is the goal and glory of creation. Out of the infinite eons of cosmic gestation he rises; he struggles, doubts, dreams, suffers, sings and dies. But he is not just a frail thing of nature but a being conscious of God within him. Religion arises from man's sense of the Infinite. The growth of the religious consciousness means man's progress in the knowledge of himself. The Meetei thinkers of the distant past attempted to discover the meaning and significance of human life. Despite their ignorant superstitions they exhibited enlightened faith and sought to trace the working of the divine spirit in the universe and the place and function of man in the divine scheme.

The word 'Meetei' means mankind. 'Mee' means 'man' ' means 'other'. Man is other than God who has created him and is other than the creatures who are devoid of self-consciousness. Viewed in this light the word 'Meetei' does not denote a few people belonging to this land only. It denotes human being through whom God realises his

supreme purpose. To the early Meetei thinkers human nature, in its richness and variety, in its heights and transcendence, was a baffling mystery. They did not consider man in isolation, i.e., apart from the ultimate reality. The main feature of all the Puyas is the enquiry into the nature of man, his origin and destiny.

According to Leithak Leikhalon Puya after the creation of the earth and the heaven Atiya Sidaba ( Immortal Sky ) asked Ashiba to create human beings. Ashiba created the first man *Pongkhu* on the pattern of the image of Atiya Sidaba. But to make it alive was a problem. Only when five deities, Koubru, Apanba ( Pakhangba ), Thangjing, Marjing and Wangbren, entered into the body of Pongkhu with the Supreme Deity Lainingthou, and seated themselves in their proper places within the body as souls (life essences) Pongkhu became alive. The five souls were named Tinon, Neno, Tatan, Piyan and Yapi.<sup>1</sup> Thereafter Pongnaoton was created by Ashiba on the pattern of the image of Atiya Sidaba. But he also could not breathe. The deities Kari, Kara Arangba, Okonglon and Nongtamba were placed by Atiya within the body of Pongnaoton as the five souls and then he breathed. <sup>2</sup> In both these cases man was created by God and he became alive only by the divine power which worked within him as the soul or the life essence

The Wakoklon Hilel Thilel Salai Amailol Puya again says that the first human Species was created by Konsen Tulei Henba (Sanamah) who arose from the sacred water preserved by Salalel Sidaba and Lemalel Sidabi ( the Supreme father and mother ) in a sacred pot. It is said that Sanamah created different orders of living species, first those who could live in water, then those who could live in water and land both, then those who could live in hills and jungles. But all these different species of living

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1. *Leithak Leikhalon*, p. 55.

2. *Ibid* , p 39

creatures could not satisfy Salailé Sidaba. Man was created then ultimately on the pattern of the image of Salailé. The first created human being was named Mee-Khalouba, and Salailé made him alive. Seeing the majestic beauty of Mee-Khalouba Leimalel wished to have a divine child. The child so born was named Konchin Tukthaba. Acquiring perfect knowledge of God and his creation he won the title Pakhangba. Pakhangba married seven divine girls (Lai Nurah Taret) and by them had seven sons who become the ancestors of the seven yeks of the Meeteis. According to this puya Konchin Tukthaba was the foremost Ancestor of mankind. He was addressed as Iputhou Pakhangba, the grandpa of mankind. He is known as Meekiti Makok Laikiti Mamei (the beginning of mankind and end of the divine).<sup>1</sup>

According to Ningthourol Seireng Ashiba's seven children were the seedlings of mankind. They were made alive by the Atingkok Maru Sidaba. Of the seven children so created one was seated on the peak of Koubru to rule over the gods. Konchin Tingthokpa was assigned to rule over the created world. The six children and Konchin Tingthokpa thus became the ancestors of mankind. The six children were Ingouraba (Angom), Ashanba (Nganba), Imurangba (Luwang), Khemanba (Khuman), Ashan Memanba (Khaba), and Muwaoba (Moirang). They were led by Konchin Tingthokpa Pakhangba. The Meeteis look upon Atingkok as the foremost manifestation of the ultimate reality. Taopilonai is considered to be the feminine principle representing the collection of elements floating within the infinite lap of Atingkok. According to the ancestral genealogy maintained by the Meeteis still today Atingkok Maru Sidaba is

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1. *Wakoklon*, pp 32-36, 57-58

the ultimate Father and Taopuloimai is the ultimate Mother. Thus the Meeteis claim divine origin of all people. Creation is realisation of God's Will. Man is the cream of this creation. The divine purpose i.e., God's manifestation into the universe of things and beings and realisation of Himself again in and through the manifestations can be fulfilled only through this cream species, the mankind. It is for this reason that the traditional beliefs and the puyas of the Meeteis regard human life to be the most valuable of all (Taipang Mapok Athoiba). Some expressions indicating the divine essence in man are made in the puyas *He Mee Lai Oipasa* (Oh man who is but divine),<sup>1</sup> *He Mee Laika Tainapasa* (Oh man who is next to god),<sup>2</sup> *He Mee thawai leipasa* (Oh man who has the soul—the supreme essence of life),<sup>3</sup> *He Mee Lai Manpasa* (Oh man who is like god).<sup>4</sup> Ashiba's creation of the different orders of living species—those that can live in water first, then those that can live in both water and land, and then those that can live in mounts and jungles, and Ashiba's presentation of all these living species to the Lord of creatures to see whether these creatures could serve the divine purpose of self-manifestation and self-realisation and the dissatisfaction of the Lord with all those created beings and His asking Ashiba once again to create still another species on the pattern of His own image—all these are suggestive of the divine interest in the human species. God endowed man with divine qualities, intelligence and spirituality. The thrusting in of the Thawais (souls) by the deities and their seats within the human body as

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1. *Wakoklon Hilel Thilel Salai Amailon Pukok Puya*, pp 13, 25.

2. *Ibid*, p 15 3 *Ibid*, p 19 4. *Ibid*, p. 37

the five souls (principles of life) clearly show the inherent divine element in the human constitution. Man could appreciate and realise the Supreme Being and His glorious activities in the creation of the universe. At the very outset the Meeter puya Leithak Leikhalon clearly speaks of the perishable nature of the entire manifested universe of things and beings. They are all subject to the universal law of death and decadence. All the nine orders of heaven and earth, fire, water, air and even all the deities disappeared into the primal potential nothingness. Thus the physical constitution implies the mortal nature of man who has a body constituted by the different manifested elements in the universe. Thus the human beings have two main aspects: the physical, unintelligent, material aspect on the one hand and the spiritual, intelligent and immortal aspect on the other.

This mortal frame, the human body, is called by the Meeters, Hakchang. We may now understand its very nature and constitution from the meaning of Hakchang. Hakchang is a combination of two words Hak (meaning heavy and valuable) and Chang (meaning quantity or proportion). It thus means the combination of heavy and valuable elements in a certain quantity or proportion. So much significant is the proportion of the elements in the body that any change that disturbs the equilibrium causes serious consequence in the body such as death and illness. If the disturbance is temporary there is illness, and if it is permanent there is death. Now the questions arise: what are the elements that are combined in a certain proportion? Wherefrom are the elements taken? How are they combined and in what proportion?, and who combines them? As the answers to these questions lead naturally to the metaphysical background of the body, a discussion on the nature of the soul which is within the body controlling and regulating it-becomes a must. A body apart from soul is but dead matter.

Human life is said to be the most outstanding creation the cream of the created world. All things in the infinite bosom of the universe are for man.<sup>1</sup> Like the Vedic Aryans, the Meeteis also believed that there are mainly five primary elements fire, water, air, earth and heaven that constitute the human body. The Meetei funeral of the dead body called Pot-Loiba ( placing things at the proper place on the close of an event) indicates that the human body, after death has been appropriated into the different constituent primal units. The element of fire joins Fire , water joins Water , air joins Air ; earth goes to Earth , and Heaven to heaven After one's death the immortal soul in him finds a new body constituted by the five elements. It stays first in the sky then in water, then in the beast having no foot, then in the sun, then in the stars for some time, then in the father, and then ultimately in the womb of the mother for a new birth.<sup>2</sup> The individual form may change, but the essence is not destroyed.

In the puyas it is found that Ashiba is the main divine architect creating the different orders of living creatures including the human beings But this Ashiba (Sanamah) is God Himself appearing for the purpose of creation The thrusting in of the life principle, the Thawais (souls) into the body of human being, as shown by the puyas, is done by the deities who are the diverse expressions of God. In all these accounts of the puyas the creation of the human world is but a divine affair in fulfilment of the supreme wish of Tengbanba Mapu to manifest Himself into a Universe and realise Himself through it.

From the above discussions it is evident that man has a mortal frame—his body, which is subject to death and decadence being a member of the manifest universe in which nothing is permanent. Even the primal elements of

1. *Eeyek Salailon*, p 60

2. Cf. *Nong'on Pathup Wachetlon Puya*.



fire, water, air, earth and heaven shall have to disappear at the end. Over and above this mortal feature of the human being there is still something more which is free from mortality. In the absence of this the human body constituted by different elements of the manifest universe is inert. All human activities are due to the presence of the soul in the body. The search for this principle which lies at the background of human life is the main task of the Meetei puyas.

Man is called 'Mee' for it has been created on the pattern of the shadow or image, called 'Mi' in Meetei language. Man is so made that he is capable of realising the supreme unity running through all things and beings in the universe including himself. According to the Puyas, man has an immortal essence within the mortal frame. What is immortal belongs to Tengbanba Mapu who is the Immortal Self (Yaibirel Sidaba) transcending the perpetual procession of decay, death and disappearance. To the Meeteis the human body is a place of divine habitation. So long as the equilibrium once set by God is not lost, the deities live in the body of the man as the Thawais (souls). Man possesses mind (Pukning) and intelligence that make him conscious of the divine glory. Though there are five Thawais, ultimately they are all one. As to how they enter into the body, it is said that Atriya Sidaba pierced into the body through the Linfu (the uppermost soft area of the cortex) and took in the five deities through his breath. They are placed in the five parts of the body: Koulru in the cortex, Marching in the heart, Apanba in the navel, Thangjing below the navel and Wangpured in the sex glands.<sup>1</sup> The Puyas refer to a sixth soul called the shadow (Mi). It is a part of the personality and is associated with the body at the time of birth. When the midwife (maibi) cuts the umbilical cord with a bamboo knife, she invokes the six souls to take up their place in the child:

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1. *Leithak Leikhalon*, p. 55f

'O five souls—the shadow also a sixth—O come.'<sup>1</sup> It is believed that the Thawai and the Mi, life—essence and shadow always go together. So long as the Thawais are within the body, the Mi is also there. When Thawais go out, the Mi follows.

The principle of life is called Lainingshung Heiyi who makes all the creatures breathe for their life. All that blows are His breath. This divine breath is of two orders : one outside the body of the creatures and the other within the body. The former is called Atiya Sidaba (Immortal Sky) and the latter Yaibirel Sidaba (Immortal Soul). The former is called Yanglouba while the latter is Thawai Chengacha ( the soul that enters into the body at some opportunity ). The former is called Nongshit ( that blows in the Nong as His own breath ) while the latter is Nungshit ( that blows within the body of the creatures as their breath ) But these two, Nongshit and Nungshit, are but One, the Supreme Life principle called the Lainingshung Heiyi. The union of Nongshit and Nungshit, the Yanglouba and the Thawai Chengacha is the occasion of death to the beings. The Supreme breath, the Lainingshung Heiyi, the Nong is the Ultimate Principle of Life, the immortal element in all. The blowing in of this breath makes life and the blowing out death.<sup>2</sup>

Linfu ( the human cortex of the brain where Koubru seats in the body ) is the source of all the transparent life fluids in the body. The Supreme Mother Leimalel seated below the navel calls down this fluid from the Linfu in order to animate the whole body. Lainingshung Heiyi shines like a diamond on the forehead of the human being. It is due to the special divine gift, mind ( Pukning ) that man alone is able to enjoy self-conscious existence. So long as Pukning regulates the activities of the Thawais, there is conscious control over all affairs within the body. But when it is drawn

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1. Parratt, S N , *The Religion of Manipur*, p. 78

2. Nonglon Pathup Wachetlon, p. 15a

up towards Lainingshing Heiyi, it loses all control and follows the supreme Thawai, i.e., the Ningsha, the life breath. Ningsha goes out to its counterpart the Nongshat (Yang-louba). With this union there is the death of the individual. That the immortal Laininingshing Heiyi is in the body of man is regarded as a secret (athuppa wa). His place is said to be beyond the reach of the sun and the moon. The meaning of the statement is that the two eyes representing the sun and the moon cannot see the forehead where the immortal self rests in the human body. The secret of this divine presence cannot be known by those persons who are greedy, proud and untruthful and have no settled mind.<sup>1</sup>

To the Meeters death is only a stepping stone, not the stopping place. Man's physical body has an end but his inner self has life eternal, for it is involved in the cycle of birth and death. Death and illness are inflicted on human beings by God to make them aware of their status as members of the mortal scheme and to instil in them the desire to attain eternal divine life.<sup>2</sup> According to Nonglon Pathup Wachetlon Puya, there are three life-streams within the body. They are called Kha-Khong, Lai-Khong and Malang-Khong. Of the three, the middle one, Laikhong leads to the Supreme Lord. Leimalel, the Supreme Mother alone knows this way. When the equilibrium of the elements in the body is disturbed, the five souls come up to Leimalel (who has her seat on the lotus heart) to apprise her of the turbulent streams. Then shouting Hou-Hou she comes up to Maru Sidaba following the course of Laikhong. The union of Leimalel and Maru Sidaba is called Hung-Ning which is the cry of all the deities who move upwards to leave the body. All the souls (Thawais) then merge in the life-breath (Ningsha)

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1 *Ibid*, p. 15f

2 Singh. O. Bhogeswar, *Ningthourol Seireng*, p. 21

which then stops functioning and unites with its counterpart Nongshit blowing outside the body. All deities merge in Atingkok who becomes united with the Supreme Deity, Lainingshung Heiya. When the latter leaves the body, the individual dies.<sup>1</sup>

The human body is considered to have been constituted by various elements found in the manifest universe and is thus subject to decay and death. But it is never condemned by the Puyas. The whole being of man is not the body alone. There is an essence in him that is immortal and that makes him alive. The entry of the eternal essence into the transient body is a divine affair in which different deities make themselves seated in different parts of the body. The human body is therefore regarded as a temple.<sup>2</sup> The Supreme God as seated in the body has different names. He is called Yungching Hanba for his descent from above and stay below. He is called Ipuroi for his being always with man and the world. He is called Humthok for his being sprung from Atiya. He is called Meisangba for his watchful care.

All the Puyas agree that death means release from bondage. Polpirang Puya says that when thawais are compelled to unite with the Supreme Lord, death occurs. Khamoi Yangoi Sekning Puya says, "Know that it is death if Yanglouba and Chengacha unite and become free from strain and trouble."<sup>3</sup> Yanglouba means the air blowing without in the Nong, the Boundless whole. Chengacha means the life-breath blowing within the human body. Death is merging in the Infinite Expanse.

Nongkaba, Nongmanba, Laiokhuba and Shiba are words commonly used to mean Death. To know what Death means we may try to understand the implications of these

1. *Noaglon Puthup Wachetlon* p. 10f

2. *Id.*, p. 19

3. *Khamoi Yangoi Sekning Puya* p. 2

words. Nongkaba is a combination of the words : Nong and Kaba. Nong according to the Puyas is God, the ultimate and Kaba means to climb or to go up. Nongkaba thus means the going up or climbing towards the Ultimate Home, the Heavenly abode Nongmanba, a combination of two words : Nong (the Ultimate) and Manba (fading away) means the fading away of an individual's life in the Nong. Laroikhyba, a combination of two words Lai (the divine) and Oikhyba (to become) means the individual's becoming divine or return to his divine abode. These terms suggest the meaning of Death to be the individual's union with the Lord. Shiba popularly means death. The term has many implications like dismantling or decomposition of a thing. As the human body is a material thing, on the death of an individual his corpse is decomposed and dismantled in a natural process and the elements that constitute the human body return to their respective ultimate original abode.

From the above discussions it is clear that Death means the end of the earthly life of the individual human being and his going to the original heavenly home, the Nong. The material elements that constitute his body go back to their original places in a funeral process called Potloiba by the Meeteis. The immortal essence that is in him also becomes one with the Supreme Deity, the Nong, the Tengbanba Mapu.

Traditionally the Meeteis believe that when a man dies he goes to the land of Death known as Khamung Sawa led by an enchantress called Kiko-Lou-Oabi. Immediately after death the individual is believed to be going to a place called Khonghampat where the dead wash hands and legs<sup>1</sup>. Then he crosses a stream and proceeds to Thongak-the main gate of the land of Death. There he meets the deity

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1. Khong = foot, Hamba = to wash, and pat = lake (watery place) Khonghampat means the watery place where feet are washed.

Thongak Lairembi who controls the gate. Led by Kikoi-Lou-Onbi who could assume any form according to the choice of the dead, the man proceeds through a small plain known as Thongak Ashithel and along the Makui Nungol Chung, the range of hills where the dead man realises that he is dead and has left his former life. Thus proceeding, he reaches Khamnung Sawa where Thongarel reigns supreme. This land of the dead is considered to be underworld. Its Lord is said to be Lai Wangpurel Sidaba of the South who has been identified by some with Thongarel. The Meeteis considered the South to be the land of the dead. When Hinduism became the religion of the state this Wangpurel/Thongarel was considered by the Meeteis to be the counterpart of Yama, the Lord of death according to the Hindus. All the traditional legends suggest that the Meeteis believed in life after death. The souls after their stay under the mighty rule of the Lord of Death, undergoing punishment for their vices and enjoying divine bliss for their virtues in the former lives, are reborn in the human world.

The philosophical reflection on the whole course of human life from the cradle to the coffin and the traditional belief in rebirth are shown in an old funeral song of the Meeteis. The song allegorically narrates the life of the human being. Fed by the mother's breast the child grows up. When grown up he enjoys life's varied temptations. He fights the battle of life as lured by the evil temptations, passions, desires and greeds. He finds himself baffled. He suffers defeat in the fight. While retiring in utter disappointment in the struggle of life, he realises his own misdeeds against the supreme law of God from which he has gone astray. He feels that he is far from his heavenly home. Finally he meets his own end—the death. He leaves his sweet body. But the moment he leaves the body he again aspires after the previous life with the former body. He attempts to rehabilitate in that body. But in the old

body he cannot enter. He is in bewilderment. He wants to find a place in life. But all his attempts are in vain. His well wishers and near ones are crying for his rebirth in new human life following a natural course.

The funeral song runs as follows :

Heirangkhoinda Chanaba Heinida—Heirangkhoi is an edible fruit

Sibu Thoina Haoba Heidi —Sweeter than it

Chindanba Heinida —is the milk from mother.

Mayai Leikai Thambal Satle —Lotus blooms in the middle,

Khoimuna Ille Khoiraba —The bees hum and run after it.

Sabi Lao Lao Chatsi Lao — Oh great, come and let us go

Kallakpa Yamni Kanjaoba Yammi The greedy and envious are many

Mangda Tharo Lao Go forward in the front

Lansonbiḡi Lamyaida In the midst of the thick battle

Monuna Ware Potthaba The man being tired, takes rest,

Ipam Lamdam Yenglubadi Looking back at the original abode

Nungshiba Maikai Tamkhare The sweet lovely place is far away.

Chekia Paikhrabana Pombi When the once flown bird comes back

Hanjillakpada Cheklagi Kaidongfam Khangda- It cannot have a place for stay

bana Pombi Kakngaonare And the bird is bewildered.

Sabi Inem Macha Pammubi Oh great, the sweet and lovely

Chingnunggi Sanna Loktudagi From the gorge wherefrom all descended,

Paibiraklone Come back flying.

This last part of the song suggests a new birth after death. In Indian philosophy also passions and desires are accounted for as the cause of birth. Life with passions and desires continue to get involved in the vicious circle of birth and death. This song clearly suggests that the soul by its very nature belongs to God, the Supreme Immortal Soul, Tengbanba Mapu. He who has known the true nature of his own self, knows himself in his original nature and is immortal. As in Indian systems, so in the religious philosophy of the Meeteis the impact of the passions and desires can be dispelled only by true knowledge of the soul.

To the Meeteis, the human body is a Lang ( a trap ) in which the soul bird ( Thawai Polpi ) is kept. Leaving the former Lang (body) the soul bird goes to another Lang. This is called Langon (the change of body). Human birth means this Langon. As said by Mangang Laininghal to Luwang Leikoiba in the Polpilang puya the origin of man's life is the Sun. The Sun is taken to be Sanamahı while the moon is Apanba Pakhangba. He represents the Supreme in the manifest world of things and beings. He is Korouhanba · he is Atiya Sidaba. He is Apanba Pakhangba. That which would become human being comes from the Sun first. Then it is handed over to the Moon (Apanba). The moon again gives it over to Thaba (Evening star), then to Sachik (Morning star), then to Okpuroi, then to Taohuireng, and then ultimately to the man who would be father. The father bears it for two months. After that it is given to the mother. The Meeteis call father Ipan Panthou for it remained there (Panba) in the father for two months. For its being given over to mother and her taking care of it, mother is called Thanglen Irubi İma. According to the Meeteis, the life cycle of a man is complete in seven generations ranging from the İputhou Parel ( Great-great grandpa ) to grandson. First İputhou Parel initiates, then İputhou, İpu (grandpa), İpa



father), *isha* (the self), *loha* (son) and *lahu* (grandson) come successively. *Isha* means the completion (*shuba*) of the life cycle. These are the seven generations of a human being as set forth in the *puyas*. The Meeteis call this *Langon Taret*.<sup>1</sup>

Dr Radhakrishnan observes, "The one doctrine that has the longest intellectual ancestry is the belief that the ordinary condition of man is not his ultimate being, that he has in him a deeper self, call it breath or ghost, soul or spirit. In each being dwells a light which no power can extinguish, an immortal spirit, benign and tolerant, the silent witness in his heart. The greatest thinkers of the world unite in asking us to know the self." The Meetei *Puyas* clearly enunciate this great truth. The possibility of our existence beyond the short span of our present life is justified by the very nature and constitution of the human being. Some of their views are crude. But they exhibit flashes of profound insight into the problem of human destiny. Materialism is rejected. Man is not just a physical object but a mixture of matter and spirit. But the early Meetei thinkers gave expression to their thoughts in language and style that suited their land and time. Their aim was to lead man to the Highest Truth. Man is rooted in the Spirit—man is divine—this is the central teaching of the Meetei religious thought. Spirit stands for the changeless principle of ultimate reality. The spirit in man is not an evolutionary phenomenon. It has not evolved from the material elements. Without Thawais man is just an inert material body. With the entry of these souls man is

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1 *Kala, P., Leihou Nonghou, pp. 11-18.*

2 *Radhakrishnan, S., Eastern Religions—Western thought,*

raised above the level of the natural world. He is not simply the animal gone up but represents a sudden break, a leap into a new form.

Man, however, begins his earthly journey with matter. He bears the marks of change and temporality in his fragile body. But he is a complex being because he belongs to both divine and material orders. To the Meetei thinkers, matter is not evil because it is a manifestation of the Supreme. The body, therefore, is not wholly unimportant to man. Had there been no matter, life would have been impossible. But man as spirit transcends the material plane. This divine destiny of man works as a purifying and uplifting power in the heart of the individual. However long and devious the way, he will reach his divinely appointed goal.

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## CHAPTER V

### FESTIVALS

It is impossible to give a clear conception of the religious philosophy of the Meetei without a study of their important religious festivals. Through the organized worship of the gods the individual shares in the unity and harmony of the social order. Religious festivals foster the growth of spiritual consciousness and seek to 'establish an essential kinship between man and god. The ancient Meetei festivals contained, though, no doubt, in 'a magical fashion, the germ of mystic and sacramental religious forms. They are observed even now and have brought about some changes in the observance of the Hindu festivals. Some of the main festivals of Meetei origin will be examined in the chapter to throw light on the traditional religious beliefs of the people. In this connection an extensive exposition Lai Haraoba will be given because all the indigenous elements of the Meetei religion are preserved in this festival.

#### (a) CHEIRAoba

Cheiraoba is the New Year's festival which takes place on the first day of the month of Sajifu (March).<sup>1</sup> The word Cheiraoba is considered to be derived from Chahi (year) and Laoba (declare) or Chei (stick) and Laoba (declare). Traditionally Cheiraoba means the declaration of the commencement of the new year by holding a stick with a bell fixed on its top. The holding of this festival shows the significance of Time which is represented by Chahi (year). As this festival is held on the first day of the first month of Meetei Thapalon (calendar), the festival is now popularly

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1. Parratt, S.N. *op. cit.*, p 46

known as *Sajifu Cheiraoba*. It is also called *Kurak-Lang-taiba* ( *Kumgi Lakyel Taiba* ) the festival that marks the joining of two years—the passing and the coming year. This festival has close connection with *Chahi*, the year, that represents the Time which carries within its mighty womb all things and beings in this universe with all their fortunes. He who knows the twelve months of the year, the thirty days of the month, the seven days of the week, and one full course of the day with its three great divisions into *Mangang*, *Luwang* and *Khuman*, is one who knows the Divine—the Supreme Reality—the Ultimate background of the universe. This whole Infinite Time is represented by *Chahi* ( year ) which is again represented by months. The months are represented by the weeks, and the weeks by days. Thus the whole Time is ultimately represented by a day which has three great divisions into *Mangang*, *Luwang* and *Khuman*. A Day is called *Nongma*. *Nong* means the Supreme Lord, the *Lainingshing Heiyi*, the only One *Teng-banba Mapu*. He is wise who knows the full course of a Day *Nongma* ( *Nong Ama* ) with its three divisions and prays to the Almighty Father at the setting in each of division. But these days constitute weeks, the weeks constitute the month, and the months constitute the year, the *Chahi*. It is in the course of a year that one collects all that will make him live. In a way *Chahi* is taken to be a divine fruit given to mankind for his livelihood in a particular time span. Thus the Meeters give so much importance to *Chahi* that they hold a festival at the joining of the two years, the passing and the coming one, in the name of *Cheiraoba* with prayer and worship to the deities of their belief to guard them against death and diseases, and bring prosperity and peace for the coming year. Though in the ancient times it was held under a different name *Kurak Langbaiba*, from the time of *Nasphongba* (433 A.D.) this festival was held publicly on the first day of the first month

of the year through announcement of the commencement of the year by the Lakpas (Divisional officers). The announcement was made by holding a long bamboo stick with bells fixed on top of it. For this reason the festival came to be known as *Chei Laoba* (Chei=stick, Laoba=announcement). People cleansed their premises and households in honour of the coming year. They performed a number of Laithous—worship and prayers to gods and goddesses both inside and outside the residential premises. This practice continued till the time of king Kyamba<sup>1</sup> who introduced the system of Cheithaba in place of Cheilaoba. In Cheithaba a person was selected for the purpose by a process of comparing his individual horoscope with that of the king. He was held responsible for any calamity that might befall the king, the state and the people. His function was to save the king and the nation from disaster. The year was named after this Cheithaba person as a mark of honour to him. Cheithaba literally means the counting of sticks (Chei means stick, Thaba means counting).<sup>2</sup> The year is represented by the stick and counting of the year is done in terms of the stick. The Cheithaba person is usually selected from among the close associates of the king born under the same star with the king.<sup>3</sup> During the ceremonial the outgoing Cheithaba prayed for the prosperity of the king and the people, and the incoming Cheithaba promised to bear on his head all the king's sins and misfortunes and all the calamities threatening the people. The symbolism of the sticks was described by Higgins in his account of the Cheithaba for the year 1926.

'Let all the evils such as war and battle, enmity and struggles, fall down at the advent of the new year in which the seasons of the ancient god Pakhangba, who is the head

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1. King Kyamba reigned in the second half of the fifteenth century.

2. Hodson, T.C., *the Mewhels* pp. 104-5.

3. Cheitharol Kumbaba, p. 10

of gods, fallen from the sky at a happy place, and the god Chingshomba the white who reigns in the north east, are invested with the ceremony of Cheithaba, in which the Cheithaba man performs it with a stick on his shoulder—the stick which exempts the Cheithaba man from the burden of public work when he is seen to carry it on his shoulder on the public road the stick which can make one conquer great and small kingdoms in battle, the stick which is attached to the bamboo tube in the time of coronation at Kangla, the stick which is used by warlike young men in fight, the stick which was the hilt of the sword of the god Thangjing, the stick of which the head is known at the first touch, the stick that opens the door of the earth and fills up the underground pit in the month of Sajibu, in the reigns of all kings according to ancient custom ”<sup>1</sup>

With this Cheiraoba Festival, some important laithous (prayers and worships to deities) are associated. Singtek Singthaba is taken to be of great importance by the Meeteis since this Laithou is connected with the life and death of the human beings in that year. It is the traditional belief of the Meeteis that there is Lai-Khundin (Assembly of the deities) on every Saturday of the month of Lamta, the last month of year. In this assembly the number of sticks representing those persons who would die during the coming year is counted by gods. On the eve of Cheiraoba there is the ceremony of requesting the deities to spare their lives. This ceremony is called Singshatpa (Sing=stick, and Shatpa=take out or withdraw) which means withdrawal of lives from the divine counting. Normally it is done at Heibokching, a small hill to the south of present Imphal. Certain offerings are made to the deities to please them: one cloth for Lainingthou (male deity), one cloth for Lairemma (female deity), one canopy, some iron and gold, fifteen bamboo tubes filled

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1. Quoted from Parratt, S.N. *the Religion of Manipur*  
p 47

with kabok akhungba (puffed rice), fruits and flowers, an earthen pot of molasses and ten candles made of bee wax. After the performance of appeasement rites the maibas remove from the sticks those representing people whose lives have been reprieved.<sup>1</sup>

The Meeteis celebrate another ceremony called Saroi Khangba (Saroi=the evil spirits, Khangba=propitiation) on the day of Cheiraoba. This is the rite of propitiation and appeasement of the sarois, the evil spirits. This is done by the elderly ladies of the locality. From each home edible items such as rice, vegetables, sweets and others are collected and offered to the tutelar deities Koubru, Marjing, Wangpuel and Thangjing in order to propitiate the Sarois who are perpetually hungry, and demand food from human beings. The main objective of this Saroi Khangba is protection against death and illness.

On the eve of Cheiraoba houses are thoroughly cleansed and old utensils are replaced by new ones. During the festival special worship of Sanamahı and Leimarel is performed. Further a rite is performed at the gate of the house for long life and prosperity of the members of the family. Three portions of rice are offered for the Cheithaba of the past year, the Cheithaba of the present year and that of the coming year. The deities who are said to partake of these offerings are Iammaba Tumaba (Lord of my land), Kumsana Kumlikıı (The golden year) and Iram Shenba Tushenba (guardian of my land). This ceremony is really a prayer to the Supreme Lord who is the all-encompassing Time.

One of the main features of Cheiraoba festival is the performace of Ushıl. Fishes of a particular type (Ngamu) are set loose in the pond, each one representing a particular member of the house. By observing the movements of the fish it is predicted whether the coming year will be pleasant

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1. cf *Mashı Singtek Singshat pıya*.

for the person or not. When this ceremony is carried out by the Maibas, the fish represents the king. It is followed by offerings of money, fruits and flowers etc. in order to secure the prosperity of the kingdom.

On the seventh day of Cheraoba another ceremony of divination is held in the region between the Iril river and the village of Kongba, east of Imphal. There are two sacred places in the area : one for Angom Pokpa and the other for Ningthem Pokpa—both facing the south. The materials found in digging a particular spot are carefully collected and preserved in a piece of cloth. After it is carefully tied, it is hung on the neck of Maiba, the priest who performs the ceremony for the king and the state. Then it is carried to the temple of Yumjao Lairembi ( the goddess of the Royal Home ) at the palace, and then it is preserved in an earthen jar. For consecutive five days offerings will be made to the deity. The offerings consist of the shareng ( a long white fish ), gold and silver discs, customary flowers and fruits. After five days the jar is opened and the contents are observed by the Maibas and then predictions concerning the king and the state are made. All the materials will again be brought to the place wherefrom they have been collected. This filling in of the hole takes place in the month of Sajifu. The two rituals are given the names Kongba Leithong Phatpa (digging the hole at Kongba) and Sajifu Leikhun Phunba (closing up the hole in Sajifu) respectively. Even in the pre-historic days long before the reign of Nongtala, the first historic king in 34 A.D. this tradition of performing rituals in honour of the coming year was held. This festival was celebrated at that time in the month of the year following the movement of the sun

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from the north to the south, called Khayum by the Meeteis, and from the south to the north called Laiyum. The tradition is still maintained in the Meetei Khurai. The holding of the said function in the month of Sajifu is considered to be due to the doubling of the month in Wakching. Since then it has been held in the month of Sajifu taking it to be the first month of the year.

#### (b) LAI KEITHEL KABA

Lai Keithel Kaba was originally a festival held in the ancient days for maintaining good relation, peace and harmony among the deities and human beings. It was believed by the Meeteis that on this occasion the divine ladies sold heads of human beings and cats, and these things were purchased by the deities and human beings for a grand Feast. The function was originally known as Lai Keithel Kaba (attending the divine market). The ceremony was later modified by Nongtalai who performed it on the 20th day of the month of Lamta at Kangla where Khwai Nongcheng Piba had great influence and Kanglei Khonba Pakhangba revealed himself on this day. Since then the festival was known as Yek Luktin Thouram held for the purpose of bringing good relation and harmony among the different groups of people organised into yeks that constitute the present Meetei Society. As desired by his wife Laisna, Nongtalai organised Sagol Kangchei, play of Kangchei, a form of Polo as a part of the programme.<sup>1</sup> To commemorate this ceremony of their forefathers Taothingmang and Yoimongba

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1. Sagol Kangchei "is hockey-on-horseback, a game formerly peculiar to Manipur, but which of late years has spread over, and become popular throughout a large portion of British India. This is the game named Polo in England which is now so fashionable." (Brown, R., *Statistical Account of Manipur*, p. 79; See also Hodson, T. C., *The Meiteis*, p. 49)

on the advice and supervision of Thongak Kurumba Maichou organised the said function. In 1779 A.D. Ananta Shai, the uncle and minister of king Bhagyachandra, performed this important traditional ritual to bring about peace and harmony among the different groups of people divided due to the propagation of Hindu religion. A blend of the old and new faiths was made. The new religion was given a traditional foundation.

### (c) CHINGKOI IRRUPPA

ChingkoI Irruppa (bathing in the ChingkoI) is a popular festival and is associated with removal of sin through ritual bathing. ChingkoI is a small rivulet that flows around the Nongmai ching hill to the eastern part of the Imphal valley. From the point of view of the ancient tradition of the Meeteis, this hill is taken to be the abode of the important Meetei deity Nongpok and his consort Panthoibi. Their legends enriched the Meetei culture, tradition, religion and philosophy. A holy dip into the ChingkoI rivulet was made a religious duty by king Naothingkhong as he and his men took a bath in this rivulet out of repentance for, and in memory of, a SeloI girl named Piattanga who died instantaneously in his palace out of shame as she was treated by Naothingkhong as mother though she once saved him from grave danger at the hands of the Shelois and Langmais (hill tribes of the Nongmaiching hill) and the king fell in love with her and promised to marry her. Since then it has become a tradition for the Meeteis to take a holy bath in the said rivulet in the month of Lamta to be free from the sin committed in their life. But when Hinduism became the religion of the Meeteis under strong royal patronage, Nongpok and Panthoibi were identified with Siva and Durga respectively. The Nongmaiching was then treated as the abode of Lord Siva and Durga, and climbing this hill after a holy bath in the ChingkoI rivulet became a tradition.

**(d) MERA MENTONGBA**

Mera Mentongba is a festival held for five days commencing on the full moon day of Mera. It is a festival in which people worship Lord Sanamahi and Pakhangba along with the seven Lainurabs (divine girls), nine Laipungthous (divine youths) and the Umanglais. Sanamahi as the presiding deity represents the essence of the life of the universe, that which dwells in everything and being, and Pakhangba as the outward ruling deity of the created universe. Sanamahi is the Thawailai—the Thawai of the Thawais (the supreme life essence) and Pakhangba is the Milel, the shadow or image of the Lord. Since the Thawai and the Mi always go together, Sanamahi and Pakhangba are worshipped together in order to bring about a sense of completeness in the mind of the worshipper. This festival is celebrated to realise the ultimate significance of the two main aspects of the Ultimate Reality, the potential essence of all things and beings on the one hand, and the manifest universe on the other.

In this festival two main seats are prepared: one for Sanamahi and the other for Pakhangba. There is one plantain tree in front of these two seats. By the side of it is placed an ishaifu (a pot filled with water). Around it seven seats of different colours are prepared. On the inner seats—on the right Lainingthou Sanamahi is placed and on the left Pakhangba is placed. On the seven seats around, the seven Lai-Nurabs are placed. Around this arrangement nine seats are again prepared for the nine Laipungthous. The flag used in this function is the Yek/Salai flag of the Meeteis having seven different colours. Candles of wax and smokes of Khoichu-Laikham (local herbs used as incense) are used in this ceremony. Divine hymns are sung according to traditional formalities. First, Lainingthou Sanamahi is worshipped and then Pakhangba. It is followed by the worship of the seven divine girls and then the nine Laipung-

thous. The seats of the deities are made of Saiba wood (a local tree). The wood to be used in this religious function is collected from Heibokching, taken to be a sacred place.

The display of Sanamah and Pakhangba surrounded by the seven Lai Nurahs in the inner circle and then the nine Laipungthous in the outer circle shows that the multiplicity of the deities is on the circumference and not in the centre of the circle. Inwardly it is the worship of the One God – Tengbanba Mapu. He is what His devotees wish Him to be. He has no form, no name, and no attribute as He is above all these things. He has no beginning and no end. It is this One which is shown by the different Meetei Puyas as the ultimate background of all, from whom everything comes out, in whom everything dwells and to whom everything retires. It is this Supreme Being who is worshipped in Mera Men Tongba festival with a deep religious and philosophical insight into His two aspects: Sanamah and Pakhangba.

Traditionally the Meeteis believe in 361 Umanglais. But these Umanglais are but different manifestations or traces of the One Supreme God. They have been assigned several names only when they are taken severally and individually, such as Wangpurel, Marching, Thangjing, Lai-Ishing Chaiba, Oknarel and so on. But this does not mean that they are different. They are but diverse aspects of the same principle, Tengbanba Mapu, having no specific name and form.

#### (e) MERA HAOCHONGBA

Mera Haochongba is a great festival of the Meeteis in the plain and of the people in the surrounding hills. The hill people are called Haos. This festival is a social get-together of all people in the land. It was held regularly in the month of Mera till the advent of the British. All the chiefs of the different tribes in the hills came down to the valley

to attend the festival and pay tributes to the King of the Meeters. The noblemen and courtiers and chiefs of all the Salais and other dignitaries used to receive the hill brothers in the function which was usually held in the south western compound of Kangla, the palace. The king of the plain used to serve the hill chiefs and their men in a grand feast according to the hill custom with meat and wine. Both the plain and hill people attending the function exchanged their good will and love for each other and joined the sports held on the occasion of the get-together.

Captain E D Dun, a political officer in Manipur, wrote that this Mera Haochongba was the third public festival of importance in this country. He gave an account of the festival held in 1886. It lasted for one day, it was a gathering of the hill tribes under the Manipur Government. It was a curious sight on account of the great number of different tribes assembled, with their curious dress and weapons, differing from each other in feature and language, but all unanimous in one particular, to get drunk as speedily and remain so as long as possible. The hillmen indulged in feats of strength before the king of the Meeters. They also indulged in war dances and sham fights. The sports of the day concluded with a feast, at which they were regaled with the flesh of cows, buffaloes, dogs, cats etc. The flesh was dried and preserved for this feast.<sup>1</sup>

#### (f) HIYANG KUMMEI

Hiyang Kummei is the famous boat race festival which takes place in the month of September on the moat which surrounds the three sides of the king's enclosure. All means are permitted to the competitors, including attempting to overthrow the other boat. "The boats used in the races are two in number, of great length, and hollowed out of a single

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1. cf Dun, E D, *Gazetteer of Manipur, 1886*

tree ; the rowers number about twenty men, each with a short paddle. Besides the rowers are several men attending to the steering and urging on the crew .. .... There are no rewards for the races, they being rowed merely for the thing,"<sup>1</sup> Dr Parratt refers to another boat race<sup>2</sup> which takes place in the month of Langban on the canal by the Bijoy Govinda area of Imphal and confuses this Heikru Hitongba with Hiyang Kummer. In the former, as the name Heikru suggests, particular emphasis is laid on the Heikru fruit, the headman ( hitongba ) of the boat wears a garland of Heikru fruits which cannot be eaten until after the race. The religious significance of the boat race is very obscure in spite of many references to it in the Royal Chronicles. It is believed that the race was originally carried out before a lai in the pre-Hindu period.

#### (g) LAI HARAoba

The Lai Haraoba is a unique festival which embodies the ancient Meetei religious beliefs. It "Mirrors the entire culture of the Manipuri people. It reveals its strength and weaknesses, the beliefs and superstitions, and perhaps also the charm and happiness of the Manipuri people. It reflects the people at their interest"<sup>3</sup> The Meeteis believe that gods after fulfilling the wish of Tengbanba Mapu to create the world of things and beings under the guidance of Atiya Sidaba and Lemaiei Sidabi expressed their happiness. Lai Haraoba is a festival of "the merry-making of the gods and goddesses."<sup>4</sup> It means literally 'enjoyment of the gods'. Wakoklon Puya says, "Gods became happy at the creation of the earth by the will of the Supreme Lord."<sup>5</sup> The Leithak Leikhalon Puya also makes reference to the expression of divine happiness and pleasure when the primal elements

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1. Brown, R., *Statistical Account of Manipur*, p. 82

2. Parratt, S.N., *The Religion of Manipur*, p. 45

3. Singh, E.N., 'Lai Haraoba', *Marg* 14(4), 1961, p.30

4. *Ibid*

5. *Wakok Hilel Thilel Salai Amallon Pukok Puya*, p. 43

came out from the womb of Atingkok with the cry, "Ahei He Horrou Horrou Horrou Nakese", and Atingkok sang in happiness "Ha Hei Hei Ha Ha Hei Hei Ha Ha Ha Herin-linla Herinla Herinla Hayute Khulaite Heiyase Heiyase Ashibu Thoina Haraopa Leipane. Tahou Hou He Hou Heiya Naketa" <sup>1</sup> Still today this unintelligible Horrou Hoiya cry marks the beginning of Laipou Chongba dance in every Lai Haraoba.

There are different views on this important festival of the Meeteis. According to Y. Tamphajao Lai Haraoba is but an expression of the whole human life from birth to death. Human enjoyment is the reflection—the very image of divine happiness. This pleasure of the gods is expressed as Lai Haraoba <sup>2</sup> Shri H. Kulabidhu Singh, in his article Mera Men Tongba, regards Lai Haraoba as a combination of the words, 'Lai', 'Ha' and 'Laoba'. 'Lai' means the gods, 'Ha' means the chaks (Heryi; Haya, Konna and Langba), and 'Laoba' means 'to declare'. Thus Lai Haraoba means the declaration of the chak orders by gods.<sup>3</sup> The Wakoklon Hilel Thilel Salai Amailon Pukok Puya makes reference to this as Chakpalon.<sup>4</sup> Heryi chak means the period of becoming a child in the father, Haya chak means its coming to the mother, Konna chak means the child's being in the mother's womb, and Langba chak means the coming out of the child from the mother's womb into the open world. According to H. Kulabidhu the remembrance of this Chakpalon and the creation of the universe by gods who emanated from the Supreme Being, the Tengbanba Mapu, constitutes the basic feature of the Meetei Lai Haraoba.

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1. *Leithak Leikhalon*, pp. 13-14

2. *Tamphajao, Y, Meetei Lai Haraobagi Wangu Lon*, p. 3

3. *Meiteigi Harao Kummeigi, Seminar* pp. 37 f

4. *Wakoklon Hilel Thilel Salai Amailon Pukok Puya*, pp.

The Meeteis say that the human body is a divine place. The Supreme Being is seated within the body of man along with other deities manifested from it. The traces and manifestations of God are collectively termed as Umanglais—the common and popular deities of the Meeteis having their abodes in different parts of the land. It is at the place of these deities that the festival of Lai Haraoba is being held annually or at the interval of years. The festival takes place in the Meetei month of Kaleu (April, May) and lasts over a week. It commences on one of those days of the month which contain the numbers 1, 2, 3, 5 and 8.<sup>1</sup>

As has been mentioned earlier the Meetei Umanglais are only apparently pluralistic as in the ultimate analysis all the Umanglais are but the different manifestations of the same God. Tengbanba Mapu. This is clearly evidenced by the common address made to the participants of Haraoba in any Laibung “Lainingthou Lairembi Manaisa” (Oh, Servants of Lainingthou and Lairembi). Here Lainingthou and Lairembi are the two aspects—male and female—of the Supreme God. In fact in a particular Haraoba we are not worshipping the particular deity, but the Supreme Deity in His manifestation as Lainingthou and Lairembi. The individual names of the deities in question serve the purpose of pointing to the place where the Laiharaoba festival is held. Thus the main feature of Laiharaoba remains intrinsically the same everywhere. Certain outward local differences in style and presentation are not however ruled out. Considering these local differences S.N. Parratt attempts to make a broad classification of Laiharaoba into three main forms; Kanglei form as prevalent in the main valley, Moirang form

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1. Parratt S. N. *op. cit*, P. 56 Usually the first day of the month is avoided.



in Moirang particularly in the Laibung of Thangjing and Chakpa form in the areas where the Chakpa Lois inhabit <sup>1</sup> Kanglei form is taken mainly from the Haraoba style as carried on in the palace ; Moirang form of Haraoba is taken from the Haraoba of Thangjing in Moirang, and Chakpa form is the Haraoba which is basically the Loi observance in purely old primitive style. She also points out that inspite of slight variations, the basic pattern remains always the same regardless of the Lai ( deity ) in whose Laibung ( courtyard) the festival is performed. Substantially in the Laiharaoba festival of any Laipham what is being displayed first is the creation of the universe particularly heaven and earth Then are exhibited the creation of living beings particularly the creation of human beings as revealed in Chakpalon and then the growth of the human being into adult manhood, and so on The ancient divine romantic legend of Leinung Haraba and Nongthangleima and that of Nongpok and Panthoibi are reflected in the Laiharaoba dances and songs

In view of the performance of the festival in honour of certain gods, like Pakhangba of the Mangangs, Thangjing of the Moirangs, Oknarel of the Khumans etc. taken to be divine ancestors of particular yeks. Dr. Parratt says that the festival "was originally an ancestral ritual."<sup>2</sup> While attempting to prove it she draws parallel of it in Kuki ancestral ritual as noticed by Shakespear which has, however, some similarities with the Meetei way of ancestral ritual. What she wants to emphasize here is that Lai Haraoba was originally an ancestral ritual like Apokpa Khurumba (ancestral worship).. But it is to be pointed out here that Ancestral worship like Apokpa Khurumba basically differs from Lai Haraoba though in both there is the worship of the

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1. Parratt, S.N., *the Religion of Manipur*, p. 54

1. *Ibid.*, p. 53

ancestors as deities. In Apokpa Khurumba there is the predominance of private interest of the family alone while in Lai Haraoba, there is the general interest of all people. From this it is clear that Laiharaoba is not merely an ancestral ritual as Siakespear and Parratt suggest, but a search for realisation of the Supreme God in and through the multitude of the deities who are but His different traces.

On the preceding day of the festival the shrine is cleansed, the courtyard is prepared, and candles are lighted in the night at the shrine and at every home of the locality as a measure to ward off evils that may cause hindrance to the festival. The representation of the Lai is prepared and placed on a wooden throne in the shrine, and is properly adorned with clothes by the Maibi, the priestess. To quote S N. Parratt in this regard, 'The Lai itself is represented in several different ways but never by an image. The original representation of Lai was by a pair of bamboo tubes, which may have contained relics. At a later stage of development the Lai came to be represented by brass or wooden masks, with cloths placed below and above as though they were dressed. The simplicity of representing the gods has not been compromised, however. For in recent times a piece of wood or iron was used, and today coins and bamboo tubes are still used, for cultic purposes. The absence of images indicates that Hindu iconography had not influenced Meetei worship at all at the time when this rite received its present form"<sup>1</sup> The Meetei deities have no specific forms because they are believed to belong to the original Being who is formless and boundless

The calling up of the Lai from water is called Lai Ikouba. This is the ceremonial beginning of the festival. As Tamphajao says, it is the putting in of life to the temple which is otherwise lifeless in the absence of the Lai.<sup>2</sup> Some

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1. *Ibid*, p 56

2. *Tamphajao, Y, Meetei Latharaobagi Wangulon* p. 3

cultic objects are used for this, each of which has specific name and function. The main items are as follows : (1) Turel Heiruks—Fruit offerings to be made in the water ( it consists of one bunch of banana, one betel leaf and one betel nut and several other fruits and sweets), (2) Two Ihaifus : one for Lainingthou and the other for Lairembi—(Ihaifu is an earthen pot in which is placed a banana leaf thrust out at the neck of the pot and then bent down and tied with hand-woven thread of a fathom's length. The thread for Lainingthou has nine strands and that for Lairembi only seven) , (3) Two Leryoms, one for Lainingthou and the other for Lairembi (Leryom is a package of Langthrei buds covered by three layers of banana leaves tied with the thread from Lainingthou's Ishaifu. Lainingthou's package has fourteen buds facing downward while Lairembi's package has only seven buds facing upward) , (4) Khayoms of Lainingthou and Lairembi (Khayom is a package of rice, egg and three buds of Langthrei covered by seven layers of banana leaves) The Khayom of Lainingthou is tied with nine strips of bamboo while that of Lairembi is tied with seven bamboo strips. As in leryom, the langthrei buds in Lainingthou's Khayom are placed facing downward while those of Lairembi are placed facing upward) , (5) Six khudeis ( locally made thin cloth having a length of about 5 ft. and a breadth of about 14 inches for use in tying the Ihaifu and the Lai and also for use in Anam Athou (warding off evils) , (6) Konyai or gold and silver pieces

After all these things have been prepared, all men should go in a procession to the place of water from where the Lai is to be called up. The Maiba and Maibis should lay four pieces of banana leaves with coins on them. There the two Lai bearers should stand facing the temple. The maibi wraps the Ihaifus properly in a cloth and ties them round the necks of Lai-bearers. She then dances to the tune of the pena (a

kind of stringed fiddle). The maiba and the maibi lead the procession with the musicians. Then come the two men bearing the swords of the god, followed by women carrying brass vessels, and then the Lai-bearers and attendants. Reaching the place the maibi performs the rite called yukhangba – pleasing the Lai with Yu (beer) in bamboo containers which are nine for the Lainingthou and seven for the Lairembi. Then Turel Heiruk is offered in the water. After this with appropriate hymns the maibi offers Konyais to the lai and throws them into the water. There is then the invocation of the Lai by the maibi ‘(Name) come, your people will celebrate your haraoba’. After this she takes the Khayoms of Lainingthou in her right hand and that of Lairembi in the left hand and offered them to the Lai in the water. She takes the Ihaifu of Lainingthou in her right hand and that of Lairembi in the left and performs three dance movements facing the guardian deities of the four directions : Thangjing, Marjing, Wangbaren and Kouburu. The Ihaifus are then handed over to their bearers. The maibi then takes out the thread (hiri) from the Ihaifu and ties a short stick (hirichei) with the Leyom three times. Taking every precaution so that the hiri does not fall to the ground she passes the hiri over her shoulder. Covering her head with white cloth and holding the bell in the left hand she takes the leyoms in the right hand and immerses them in the water, all the while chanting the traditional hymn of creation. Then she becomes possessed by the Lai and utters the words of the Lai. It was all to the accompaniment of pena tune until the bell of the maibi stops ringing. The maibi, while she is possessed by the Lai, delivers many divine oracles, foretelling many happenings that would take place in the community in the near future. When this is over the Maibi wraps the Leyoms by their proper threads and places them in the appropriate Ihaifus. Then the event of Higaaba (disembarking) follows. With the cry Hi-Hi Hi the Lai is called up from

the water and the procession back to the shrine takes place in the correct order. At the Laibung (the court yard of the god) there takes place the event of Anam Athou Kokpa, the process of warding off the evils and also of purification. All the persons in the procession step over the things placed for the purpose of dispelling evils, such as baskets of rice, salt, ginger, duck, pigeon, fish and eggs. Then the whole procession comes to the shrine with the lai. The maiba and maibi approach the lai representations which have been deposited at the shrine and with the leiyom touch that portion of the divine representation which is supposed to be the navel of the lai. The two ihaifus are then placed on the side appropriate to the male and female deities. The leiyoms are unwrapped by the maibi. Nine langthrei buds from Lainingthou's Leiyom are placed before him and seven buds from Lairembi's leiyom are placed before her. Between the two deities nine buds are kept for the Almighty Father, Atiya Sidaba. The musicians play their instruments with sweet songs to wake up the lai from divine sleep. The maibi possessed by the lai relates many riddles and narratives beginning with the cry hoi.

Laipou Jagoi is the main item of Haraoba. It is the cultic dance representing the birth of the deity. The main Laipou dance begins with the Hoirou Hoiya cry by the Maiba or Pena singer. The maibi with the Langthrei buds between her fingers leads the rows of participants. She displays a creation dance depicting the lifting of the earth from the bottom of water. After this there is Meesenilon—the making of the human child—its coming down from heaven to the father and then staying in the womb of the mother, and then ultimately coming out from the mother's womb. All these things are depicted in the form of dance movement. Then the dance depicts the construction of a house for the

human child. It is followed by the paosa play based on the legends of the past traditions of the land. The legends of Lainingthou Khorifaba, Nongpok Ningthou and Panthoibi, Ningthou Tukaoba and Sammalembi etc. are displayed. In doing all those things, dance, songs and discourses are the media of expression. After the depiction of the ancient traditional legends the dance shows the process of jhuming cultivation—preparation of the land, sowing the seeds, growth of the plant and harvesting. Not only the food crops, but cotton plantations are also portrayed. The cotton flowers ripen and are then harvested. Raw cottons are collected and dried. The process of making threads is followed by weaving the cloth which is offered to the lai for the prosperity of the people. All these things are danced out in the Laipou using appropriate languages and movements of hands and legs. After this Jhuming performance there will be Fishing Dance which symbolizes the gathering of the spirit of the lai. From among the participants the maibi stands out and makes patton<sup>1</sup> dance performances in which she initiates the catch of life fish, the Thawais through the use of long.<sup>2</sup> Evil spirits are symbolically driven away and the spirits of the lai are brought in.

All the participants then move in the pattern of the coiling of Pafai, the divine snake. This is called Laire! Mathek dance. The whole movement is in a single row and there should not be any break in the line. Nine folds are there in the Pafai curve, and the participants form the nine folds completely. After this the whole row is divided into two, that of Lainingthou and that of Lairembi. Then the participants in the said formation proceed to the temple and

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1. *Pat-ton means the edge of the lake.*

2. *Long is a fishing basket made of bamboo.*

make the last prayer to the deity for the day. As to the Laurel Mathek (python fold) dance there are many opinions. Some say that this is an indication of the manifold generations of mankind from the One Common Ancestor—a move from One to many <sup>1</sup> At any rate Pafal has a significant place in the religious beliefs of the Meeteis. It is called Taopiloinai the mother bearing all within its womb as given by Atiangkok, the ultimate father—the common ancestor of all things and beings, divine and human. The ancestral deity Pakhangba is also characterised as a snake. The coiled snake appears on the royal flag. Thus the symbol of snake plays an important role in the life of the Meeteis. The ritual of Sarokhangba is performed to propitiate the evil spirits who are believed to be watching the festival. Rice, fruit, flower, Kabok etc are offered to them. In performing this ceremony the maibi use, the sword of the deity and drives the evil spirits towards the south where Lai Wangpurel, the guardian of the evil spirits, resides.

A very significant ritual performed before the end of the festival is the choosing of a wife for the lai (lai nupi thiba) When the maibi is possessed by a lai, she utters oracles and sings ancient hymns. She selects the girl for the lai with the help of the hockey stick. She strikes the ball and any virgin who is hit is chosen as the wife of the lai for the year. The girl so selected offers fruits and flowers to the lai and joins the maibi in leishi jagoi and later becomes

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1. *Tamphajao, Y, Meetei Laiharaobagi Wangulon, p. 15 f*

maibi. At the end of the festival the ritual of sending the lai back to heaven is performed. Holding the sword of the ai the maibi dances and sings. The pena is played and the song describes how out of a tree a boat is made for the lai to ascend to heaven. Through rhythmic clapping by the participants the lai is conveyed to his abode.

The religious festivals have kept alive and preserved the ancient Meetei culture despite various pressures to erase it. They constitute a valuable source of information about the traditional religious beliefs. They reveal spiritual truths concerning man and the universe. The festival of Lai Haraoba mirrors the kinship between man and god. It is not mere merry-making but a guiding light for the people. God is not only transcendent. Humanity is the highest medium through which God expresses His creative joy. Lai Haraoba embodies the aspirations of the Meeteis and leads us to an aesthetic vision of the world in which harmony prevails over discord and divergence.

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## CHAPTER VI

### rites

Religion is man's faith in a power beyond himself which he expresses in acts of worship and service. The life of a Meetei is full of rites and rituals from birth to death. The necessity felt in the minds of these people for their observance speaks of the immense importance given by them to the religious way of life. Though many rites as observed now are influenced by Hinduism at several points, yet they have not lost their specifically Meetei character

#### (a) TREE-CULTS

The primeval man, in presence of the moving spectacle of nature, conceived to be the expression of living power, felt an awe in which fear, wonder and reverence were mingled. Traces of worship addressed to things of nature are found in primitive societies. The term 'Umanglai' (forest or wood deity) points to tree worship among the Meeteis at the earliest stage of their religious development, though at present the original connection of lai with trees is forgotten and the term applies to any traditional deity. The tairen tree (cedrela toona) is worshipped by the loi people even today with fruits and flowers. This tree is used by the maiba (the traditional priest) for cultic purposes specially in the Lai Haraoba. A branch of the tree is waved to exorcise evil spirits. In cases of infections and diseases a branch of the tairen is hung on the door of the house. The tree once itself divine or at least the abode of a spirit is by and by regarded as sacred to gods<sup>1</sup>

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1. Singh, K.B., *Vestiges of Tree Cult among the Meeteis*, Folk Lore 5, pp. 34-36. Tree worship was widespread in Burma among priests known as, *Aras* (probably from Sanskrit *aranya* 'forest'). See Eliot, Sir C., *Hinduism and Buddhism*, Vol. III pp. 53-55.

## (b) BIRTH RITUALS

During the period of gestation the parents are advised not to harm or kill any being. In order to give adequate strength to the mother a ceremony called Kokthokchamthokpa is performed "In this the mother is seated, and her husband stands behind her, moving a burning piece of pine wood behind her head. He manipulates this torch until the shadow of his wife's head falls on her lap. The light is then extinguished. A maiba then brings a pot of water which is placed in the centre of the house, and offerings of betel nut and fruit are made. After the pot and the offerings have been prayed over by the maiba the woman washes her hands and face outside the house with the water from the pot." The purpose of this ritual "is to prevent the shadow, with its vital power, from becoming dissociated from the body." The Meetei women, in addition, worship the household deity with appropriate offerings in the fifth and seventh months of pregnancy.

Certain rites are observed at the time of the birth of the child. The attending maibi (midwife)<sup>3</sup> cuts the umbilical cord with a bamboo knife with the invocation 'O five souls—the shadow also a sixth—O come'. On the morning of the sixth day the ceremony of Ipanthaba is performed. This ritual is the occasion for remembering the divine birth of Konchun Tukthaba, son of Salalel by Leimalel.<sup>4</sup> At this ceremony both the mother and the child are sanctified by sprinkling holy water in which taren pungfai leaves are dipped with naheircl (purification hymn). Uncooked rice, leaves of heibi, vegetables, yendem (a kind of plant), roast ngamu

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1. Parratt, S N, *The Religion of Manipur*, p. 77
  2. *Ibid* The Meeteis believe that man has five thawais (souls or life-essences) and a shadow. See above Ch IV.
  3. The midwife is also called maibi but is different from the maibi, the traditional priestess.
  4. *Wakoklon Hilel Thulel Puya*, pp. 34-36

(fish), chilly and salt are placed on seven pieces of banana leaf on a winnowing fan. The maibi pretends to feed the child with the prepared mixed food seven times from seven leaves, telling the child that it is the food of his father, grandfather and of all mankind. The maibi invokes five souls and the shadow and tells the child that it is the food of life. The rest of the food is offered to the Sarois to appease them. Then the child is placed on the winnowing fan and three great deities Koubru, Nongpok and Thangjing are worshiped for the long life and prosperity of the child. The maibi then moves the winnowing fan with the child in it above a fire and asks the mother whether she likes the child or the fan or wealth. The mother replies that she likes the child and nothing else. Then the maibi gives the child to the mother. Now-a-days in the evening swasti puja is performed according to Hindu tradition but there is a pre-Hindu custom of arrow-shooting by a maternal uncle of the child in four directions beginning from the north-east and ending with north-west. This rite is performed for the purpose of driving away evil from the child. A rite for feeding the child is observed on the fifth month for the male child and the sixth month for the female child. The child is fed with the meals prepared out of offerings made to Lainingthou Sanamahi. The meal consists of rice, vegetables and ngamu fish. The yek ancestor of the child is worshipped when food is taken.

### (c) MARRIAGE CEREMONIAL

Traditional marriage ceremonial consists of several stages. The main features of these are given below

(i) Warloipot Puba : At this stage the parents of the groom ask the parents of the bride to give their daughter in marriage. Marriage is forbidden between those of the same yek. When there is agreement between the parents of

bride and the bridegroom, a day is fixed to hold the rite of Waropot. The groom's family carries food to the girl's house for offerings to the ancestors of the bride and others.

(ii) **Heijingpot** According to the tradition of the Meeteis the girl is taken to be a full blooming flower in the garden of her parents. As the price of this flower the groom's parents offer fruits to the parents of the bride. A particular fruit Heikru is traditionally taken to be the chief fruit. Still today there is the living legend of Tampha Lai-rembi of Wangu in which the Heijingpot meant for Tampha could not be completed as the heikru fruit was absent. There may be other fruits of several kinds placed in a basket called Phiruk. But without Heikru all are meaningless. This function is also called Heiching-Kharai-Puba. Seven heikru fruits are placed in the bamboo basket. If the fruits are not available, being out of season, its branches are used. These are placed in the front along with other six varieties of fruits. The other fruits are placed, three on the right, and three on the left, of the Heikru fruits or branches. This Heiching Kharai and other articles meant for Apokpa (Ancestors) and Lam-Lai (Local deities), and other things for entertainment of the people are carried by the groom's party to the bride's residence. Then the Piba who conducts the ritual arranges the Supreme Deity. After prayer to God, Tengbanba Mapu the Salai ancestors are worshipped by the parents of the bridegroom and the bride. The groom's father then hands over the heiching Kharai to the father of the bride. The bride's mother places it with the pot of rice till the marriage is over. After this event both the parties wait for the day of marriage.

(iii) **The Marriage** On the day before the marriage a formal invitation is sent to the bridegroom for the marriage. This is done by a boy of the bride's family, usually by the younger brother of the bride. A garland of Kundo flowers was prepared along with betel leaves and nuts carefully for

the purpose, The boy takes them to the groom and garlands him. The groom, prepared for the purpose, receives the invitation. On the day fixed for the marriage, at the residence of the groom certain rituals are observed. On the verandah there is the preparation of *ishafu* (water-pot) conducted by an expert. In the water pot, full to the brim, one bud of *Sangbrei*, one bud of *Langthrei* and a white flower are placed. Wax candles are lighted. Fruits, betel leaves and nuts are laid. The person conducting the prayer first makes himself sanctified and then sanctifies the groom by sprinkling the water with hymns. Then he makes impression on three places of the body of the groom: one on the forehead, one on the centre of the breast and the other just below the navel. The symbolic name of God 'Ha-Hung Hei-He Hing' is administered on the aforesaid places by the ring finger of the right hand. Then the person conducting the prayer asks the groom to pray and worship *Sulalel Sidaba*, *Leimalel Sidabi*, *Lainingthou Sanamah* and his own parents. The parents of the groom bless their son. As a measure to ward off evils the person conducting the ritual utters the hymn to drive away the evils to the south. After all these rituals are over the groom starts for the bride's residence when his breath is on the right nostril moving the right leg first.

The groom is received by the mother of the bride and other women. He has to face smokes of pulic herbs called *Khoichu-Jaikham* in order to be protected from evil spirits. He then takes his seat at the north-eastern corner of the place for marriage. This is in keeping with the tradition of *Nongpok Ningthou* whose abode is to the eastern side. At the marriage itself, the groom's family is obliged to bring offerings to the *apokpa* (ancestors) and *lamlai* (local deity). Appropriate offerings are made to the sun, the moon, stars; primal elements of water, fire, air, the sky up and the earth below, *Sanamah* and *Pakhangba* by uttering proper hymns.

The groom's family presents a bridal gift of gold ornaments, cloths and other suitable items. The bride's family reciprocates by giving dowry according to their means. This must include a Tangkhul cloth.<sup>1</sup> Then the groom takes his seat in the middle of the yard and the maiba performs the ritual of invoking the ancestors for their blessings. Then the bride bows down to the household deities and her parents. She walks around the groom seven times. On completion of each round she casts flowers on him. Then the couple place garlands of Kundo flowers around each other's necks.

An important feature of the marriage ceremony is the rite of Meetam Nga Thaba (lit, sending away of fish). Two fish are set free in the pond. The prospects of the bride and the groom are read from the movements of the fish. If the fish swim well and together, a happy life for the couple will result. Otherwise the couple will have sufferings in the married life. There is another rite for determining the prospects of the couple. A basketful of rice (Chengluk Nungshang) is carried by the leading woman of the locality of the groom. It is kept at the Phungga Lairu of the bride's house for four days. On the fourth day of the marriage this basket is opened by the bride's people at the instance of some women of the groom's family. The contents are observed to read the future. Thus if insects like spider are found, this signifies that the couple will be blessed with a good number of children.

Among the Meeteis there is another type of wedding which is closer to the Hindu gandharva marriage. This is not really elopement because the couple stay in the house of a close relative on the man's side. Both the families are informed of the situation and marriage takes place in the usual way.

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1. This signifies the close cultural relation between the Tangkhuls and the Meeteis.

## (d) DEATH RITUALS

Death according to the traditional beliefs of the Meeteis, means the separation of thawai (soul) from its temporary dwelling place, hakchang (the body). It is called nongkaba which means going up to the Nong, the ultimate principle of the world. Man is made up of the inert elements and a living principle called thawai. The disposal of all the elements which constitute a man is a must for the Meeteis. The rites and ceremonies consequent on the death of a person have been extensively influenced by Hinduism but the traditional customs are not absent. Death should not take place in the house if it can be avoided. A small hut called Khangpok Sang<sup>1</sup> is made and the dying person is carried there. A Ku-Kai (a box-like structure) is made. In this Kai the corpse is then placed. It is then carried to the place where the cremation takes place. An old man of the family drops a Langhing (raw thread from the hut (Khangpok Sang) to the place of cremation. In the absence of Langhing, pieces of cotton can be dropped. This dropping of cotton or thread is believed to be an invitation to the departed one to come back in life once again. The Kai is carefully covered with white cloth not to allow light of either the sun or the moon to pass through and reach the dead body inside. Representing the the three great primal elements of Fire, Water and Air, three ropes bind the Kai. The cloth bearing the seven colours of Meetei Yek should cover the Kai towards the portion of the head. When the dead body has been so placed in the Kai, and the Kai taken to the funeral place the hut is removed. Its removal is done carefully starting from the south-east, then south-west, then north-west and finally north-east.

In the ancient times of king Kangba the dead body was thrown out to be taken over by Kakyen Meengamba, a king

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1. *Khangba = stay in waiting.*

bird who was at the service of the king. Then it was thrown into the water of the river near Heibok Ching.<sup>1</sup> Kangbaron Puya says further that from the time of Tongkonba there had been specific place for funeral. Up to the advent of Hinduism burial of the dead was practised. The following references can be made as evidence for the method of sepulchre before Pamheiba in the 18th century A.D.

(a) Pamheiba Larei Lathup clearly states that the whole Meitei nation would be in disaster as they would be under the Burmese (Awa Leipak) domination since the bones of their forefathers were thrown in the water of the Ningthi river. It was not right to do things that would bring the nation under the enemies. For opening the funeral places and collecting the bones of the dead for throwing them down into the water of Ningthi, the king should be held responsible.

(b) T. C. Hodson writes, "It is well known that upto the advent of Hinduism, the dead were buried, and the chronicles mention the enactment by Khagemba of a rule that the dead were to be buried outside the enclosures of the houses. Gharib Niwaz ordered the Manipuris to exhume the bodies of their ancestors, which they formerly used to bury inside their compounds. At a later date in his reign, in the year 1724, Gharib Niwaz exhumed the bones of his ancestors and cremated them on the banks of the Engthe River, and from that time ordered his subjects to burn their dead."<sup>2</sup> In another passage also he writes, "... the records distinctly show that up to the formal introduction of Hinduism in the reign of Pamheiba the people buried their dead, ate meat, drank ardent spirits, and behaved just like the hill people of the present day."<sup>3</sup>

1. Lawang, N A, *Ningthou Kangbaron*, p. 7

2. Hodson, T.C, *The Meitais*, pp. 116-117

3. *Ibid.*, p. 97



(c) Shri Atombapu Sharma remarks thus, "Guru Shantidas said, 'The songs of the Meeteis should not be sung. If any body hears them attentively and sheds tears for them, in case of his death in the day time, he becomes a crow and in case of death in the night, he becomes an owl. Then it flies into Mako: Nungon Ching and falls into hell. One should not hear the legends of Nongpok and Panthoibi, and the song of Khamba and Thoibi'. Thus from the funeral places of the Meeteis huge quantities of bones were exhumed. All were carried to the bank of the Ningthi river and thrown into the water."

(d) Cheitharol Kumbaba the Royal Chronicle reports, "On the 20th day of the month of Hiyang kei the king took all the bones of the ancestors to Ningthi for cremation."<sup>2</sup>

The editor of the Chronicle comments that there were four kinds of funeral process prevalent in this land before the reign of Pamheiba (Gareb Newaz). He makes reference to Sagok Lamlen Puya which speaks of the four kinds of disposal of the dead in the air, in water, in the earth and in fire. Of the four only fire had been allowed by king Pamheiba to be in use afterwards.<sup>3</sup> The disposal in the air was the oldest of all. Dead bodies were thrown at a particular place in prehistoric days. Then came the days of throwing into water. The Kangbalon Puya says that dead bodies were thrown into the river near the sacred place, Heibokching. Later some places were selected as burial grounds. In the case of burial in the earth good food and cloths were kept beside the corpse. Some pieces of gold and silver were also put within the Kai. Cremation now takes place according to the Hindu custom by the river side. "The body is even today placed in a coffin before cremation,

1. Sharma, A., *Pakhangba*, p. 5

2. *Cheitharol Kumbaba*, p. 73

3. *Ibid*, p. 74

which supports the contention that burial was practised in pre-Hindu times in Manipur."<sup>2</sup> It is due to the traditional beliefs that the Meeteis have introduced some new practices in the Hindu method of cremation. Thus the Kai is placed on the funeral pyre made up of seven layers of fire wood that represent the seven yeks of the Meeteis. The head of the dead body is placed in the north-western direction where the supreme deity Koubru reigns. The feet point towards the south where the mighty Wangpurel, the lord of death, rules. The pyre is lit by the male next of kin amidst ritual singing of divine hymn 'Ha, Hung, Hei, He Hing' and sprinkling of holy water. It is to be noted that the custom of cremating the dead was not unknown among the ancient Meeteis. Perhaps some yeks practised it.

In the pre-Hindu Meetei society a rite called Chupsa Moithem was observed on the seventh day of death. Even now it is performed by the people. All the male members of the clan or family assemble. The Piba, the chief of the clan or family writes off the name of the dead individual from the clan or family chronicle. Due prayers and offerings are made to the Supreme Ancestor Tengbanba Mapu and other deities Salalel Sidaba, Leimalel Sidabi and Laininthou Sanamahi for peace and happiness of the departed soul. It is believed that the soul that had so long been in the body enjoying life's pleasures is now flying about in wilderness. By its very essential nature it belongs to the divine world but by its association with life's passions and desires it is eager to return to this world. Wangkhemcha Chingtamlen observes that Chupsa Moithem is a ritual observed by the relatives of the dead in order that the departed soul gets a body in a human birth. He makes an analysis of the word Chupsa Moithem. Chupsa is a combination of two words. Chup meaning absorption, and Sa meaning body. Thus Chupsa means absorption in a body. Moithem

is a combination of three words: *Mee* meaning man *Oi* meaning 'to become', and *Them* meaning 'to appease'. Thus *Moithem* means appeasement to become man. *Chupsa Moithem* thus is the appeasement to become man by being absorbed in a body.<sup>1</sup> *Wangkhemcha Chingtamlen* makes reference to *Polpi Lang Puya* which takes *Siba* (human death) to be *Nongtai Leitaipa*. *Nongtai* is the flying away of the soul in the high heaven, its original abode (Heaven is called *Nongthou*). The human body was left by the soul as it was no longer fit for its stay. It is now buried in the earth (*Leipak*). This is called *Leitaiba*. *Leitaiba* is the *Taiba* (union) with *Lei*—mother earth. *Nontai* is the union with *Nong*—The Heaven.<sup>2</sup> Thus on death all the elements that constitute the human body get united with the earth in *Leitaiba* while the soul goes up in the heaven *Nong* in *Nongtai*. The prayer to the Supreme Being, *Tengbanba Mapu* to give a new body to the departed soul in a new birth is called *Chupsa Moithem*.

As to when this *Chupsa Moithem* ceremony should be observed, the *Polpi Lang Puya* states that there are two rituals to be performed on the death of an individual after the funeral. They are *Numitki Mathou Yangkempa* (ritual according to days) and *Thaki Mathou Yangkempa* (ritual according to months). Thus on the seventh day of the death of the individual *Chupsa Moithem* rites are performed by the *Piba* of the *Sagei* with other members. This is the ritual observed according to days. The last rite is observed on the completion of one complete year. This is the ritual observed according to months. It is called *Phiroi*.<sup>3</sup> Literally *Phiroi* means the last offering of cloth. In a deeper sense it means the completion of making the cloth which symbolises a human life that requires twelve months—two months with

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1. *Chingtamlen, W., Meetelgi Nongkalon, p. 29*

2. *Ibid*, pp. 30-31

3. *Ibid*, pp. 37-38

the father and ten months with the mother. Assuming that the soul will be reborn at the end of a year, the Meeteis perform this rite of *Phiroi* by offering grand feast in honour of *Tengbenba Mapu*, *Salailel Sidaba*, *Iputhou Pakhangba* and the *Salai* ancestors. There is another rite called *Ukrong Hongba*, which must be distinguished from *Phiroi*. This ritual can be performed even years after the death of the individual. For the great souls about whose death nothing is known and also for the ancestors who died long ago this rite of *Ukrong Hongba* is performed. The manner and style in both the rites are the same.

#### (c) Agricultural Rites

Among the Meeteis paddy has so much importance that it has been divinised and worshipped as goddess. This is true of all people of rice growing areas in Asia. The Meetei rice goddess is called *Phouoibi*.<sup>1</sup> She is regarded as a manifestation of the Supreme Mother *Leimalel Sdabi* who has descended into the world to feed mankind. Fruits, vegetables and flowers are offered to the rice goddess at the four corners of the specially prepared land. But in pre-Hindu times sacrifice of black hen was made to propitiate the rice goddess.<sup>2</sup> The harvesting of the paddy and the thrashing are accompanied by different rituals. *Phouoibi* is presented with offerings of sugarcane juice, rice flour and banana, all mixed together.

The necessity of rainfall in an agricultural community led the Meeteis to perform certain rites for calling rains during periods of drought. This rain ceremony is performed at *Nongmajing hill* in a cave where stone figures are kept

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1. 'Phou' means 'the unhusked rice' 'Oibi' is the verb 'Oiba' (to become) with the feminine ending 'i'. *Phouoibi* means the goddess that becomes paddy.

2. Parratt, S N, *op cit*, p. 92

for the purpose. Legend has it that a woman, Nongmai Chanu Saleima prayed to the lai Soraren <sup>1</sup> for blessing her with nine sons. Four sons were soon born to her but they were all of stone. Disappointed she left her home with the stone children. She came to the Iril River which was then in spate. Finding that the children could not cross the river, she left them on the bank and crossed the river alone. The stones cried out at being left by the mother and the place goes by the name of Nunglaobi <sup>2</sup>. Five other children were also born to the woman. She asked Soraren how the children should be fed. She was told that her children should be fed by offerings made by the people in order to get rain. She went to a cave in Nongmaijing hill with her first four children, leaving the rest of them in different places. These sacred stones are now guarded by certain Angom sages and are never touched. When there is rain ritual, a canopy is erected over the Laipham and a white cloth is spread, on which are placed metal coins, iron plates and Langtheroi and leisang flowers. Separate offerings are made to each of the five stone figures. The maiba, conducting the ritual, wraps these stones in clean white cloths and invokes the deity (Nongmai the mother of the stone children). He then takes these stones down to the river and immerses them one after another. After the rainfall, they are taken back to their original abode.

There is another kind of ritual for production of rain. It is called Nonglaoba <sup>3</sup>. On this occasion there is exchange of obscene words and vile abuses. This rain-cry is performed by the people in the months of Lamta and Sajibu. The use of the device of nong laoba in rain-making is confirmed by the Royal chronicles :

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1. *Corrupted use of Salallel.*
  2. *Nung = stone, Laobi = crying.*
  3. *Nong = rain, Laoba = to call.*

"In 1779 sak (1857 A.D.) in the month of Ingel (June/ July) on the 22nd day, Tuesday, because of the drought and the failure of seasonal rain, the king and the Angom Ningthou both rode in a boat and abused (nong laoba) each other."<sup>1</sup>

The Meeteis believed their king to be a descendent of God. His royal boat was considered to be the representative of Iputhou (Grand father) Pakhangba. In critical times of drought the boat which symbolised the great deity was worshipped. A reference to such an event is made in the chronicles.

"In 1792 sak (1870 A D) in the month of Thawan (July/ August) on the 6th day, Wednesday, the whole congregation of maibas begged blessing from the king to get rain and worshipped the lai by opening the lock-gate where the sacred boat was : the rain descended "<sup>2</sup>

#### (f) ANCESTRAL RITES

Apokpa Khurumba ( bowing down to the apokpa') is an important ritual to be observed in a proper manner by each household. The apokpa are the deceased males of the previous three generations ( the father, grandfather and great grand father). A ceremony is held at night during the full moon in which they are invited to attend the Khurumba on the new moon day after sunset. Various offerings are kept on banana leaves which are arranged in a special way. These include cloths, fruits, betel leaf and betel nut, vegetables and fish. The raw food is offered to Sanamahī by the maiba. Then the food is cooked with water drawn from an area sacred to the particular sagei to which the family belongs. The three ancestors are believed to take food when all lights are extinguished and everybody leaves the place. Later the food is consumed only by the household. It must not be taken by anybody outside the Sagei. Even the maiba is not allowed to eat this food.

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1. *Cheltharol Kumbaba*, p. 333, Angom Ningthou was the father-in law of the king.
  2. *Ibid*, p 391

When we consider the development of the Meetei religion, we discern some beliefs and practices of the primitive stage existing side by side with those of the later and matured culture. But some elements of the distant past have ceased to play any significant part in the religious life of the people. Tradition and sentiment are however too strong to permit of the primitive practices being speedily discarded, and the tendency is to elevate them in order to bring them into accord with larger ideas. Certain stones which were probably objects of reverence in an earlier age were later conceived to be tokens of the divine presence. Some Meetei kings erected reign-stones and buried a gold cup beneath the stone. Any accident happening to the stone was believed to portend some evil happening to the reigning king. On some occasions stones were used as sacrificial altars and animals were sacrificed. The actual slaughtering was done by the non-Meetei tribes men but it is conjectured that in earlier times the Meeteis themselves killed the animals. Pakhangba used to be worshipped by the sacrifice of a pig, while Nongpok Ningthou required in addition a pair of fowls. Possession by a vampire (hingchabi) was cured by sacrificing a mithan (buffalo).<sup>1</sup>

The following reference to animal sacrifice are noted in the State chronicle

(a) "In 1392 sak (1470 A D) king Kyamba offered a gayal at the foot of Khari Hill seeking victory over Kabo Kyang. he was victorious over Kabo Kyang."<sup>2</sup>

(b) "In the year of Shanthang Mayang, 1540 sak (1618 A D) Ibungo Mayamba was born. In that very same year, in Ingel (June/July) he died. They tried to appease Nin-

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1. *Shaksepear, J, The Religion of Manipur, Folk Lore, 24, pp. 438-52*

2. *Cheitharol Kumbaba, p 10. Kabo Kyang means Burma. Khari Hill is situated between Manipur and Burma.*

gthou Marjing with wild pigs, dogs, hens and pigeons : with all these creatures they worshipped him : at every watery place they sacrificed."<sup>1</sup>

(c) "In the year of Laishraba 1555 sak (1631 A D ). Lamsingthou Khagemba, in the month of Lamda on the fifth day, a Wednesday, laid the foundations of the Kangla. It was dedicated at once. Many lais, including Koubru, were offered sacrifices under a canopy at Kuchú 100 each of buffaloes, goats, sheep, cattle, geese, pigs, fowls, pigeons, dogs, fruit and ginger—without number were sacrificed he asked for long life ""

It is evident that from the primitive period sacrifice and prayer formed the main element of the cultus. The sacrifice was an act of homage or a gift to the god in order to win some favour from him. And the belief that evils could be averted and good things gained by this means, was still operative at the early stage of Hinduisation. In the Meetei religion we find the idea of sacrifice as a means of communion between the worshippers and the deity. But gradually the inclination grew to magnify the ritual efficacy of the duly performed act. This obstructed the deepening of the inward side of the religious consciousness. The religion of the Meeteis embraces all shades of thought and belief from the wandering fancies of primitive superstitions to the highest insight. Here exists by the side of the bright cheerful pantheon of beneficent deities a world of evil demons. So we come across strange utterances of incantations and spells, charms and witchcrafts. Often sorcery and magic prevail over the genuine religious spirit. Devotion to the deity is lost in a soulless mechanism of rites and pedantries of formaham.

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1. *Ibid*, p 25

2. *It id.*, p 27



## CHAPTER, VII THE ETHICS OF THE MEETEIS

The earliest forms of religion were associated with the elements out of which the ethical life subsequently developed. Social customs stood for the general good of the people and acted as rules binding on the will of the members. Over these customs religion cast its protecting shadow and invested them with religious sanction and value. The primitive loyalty to the custom protected by God developed into moral consciousness. The main feature of the social order of the early Meeteis was the institution of yek or salai. Seven yeks inhabiting different parts of the land became welded into one nation, but their distinct identities were never lost. Each yek was subdivided into sageis or clan groups which traced descent from a common ancestor and bore the same family name. The head of the sagei was called the Piba. The configuration of social units is relatively enduring in a society. The relatively stable and continuing pattern of yeks and sageis and their interrelationships constituted the structure of the Meetei social system and determined its various functions.

Each sagei had its own deity. Each yek had a set of traditions and a deity peculiarly its own. When the Ningthouja yek subjugated the rest, a cross-fertilization of beliefs took place. There was a very great enlargement of outlook. The rise of a larger and more complex social order brought about a significant deepening of the content of the religious consciousness. An order, in the first instance, superimposed on the yeks, was by and by freely accepted and developed from within. Yek gods lost their tribal character and became the general property of the Meetei nation. The ancestors of the seven yeks were be-

lieved to be brothers. They descended from the same divine parents. Thus Konchin Tukthaba Pakhangba, son of Salalel and Leimalel was regarded as the common father of the seven ancestors. Pakhangba was thought of as the founding ancestor of the Ningthoujas. On the union of the yeks under the supremacy of the Ningthoujas the god of the conquering group would naturally claim allegiance from those who had been subdued. In the process of assimilation Pakhangba became the unifier of the Meeteis, though his worship was restricted to Ningthoujas alone.

The word 'meetei' as said earlier, means mankind. Man is created on the pattern of the image (mi) of God. He is other (tei) than God and other than the lower creatures. He is endowed with qualities of consciousness and intelligence so that he can realise God. The world is not for it self. It issues from God and must therefore seek its rest in God. The difference between man and all else is that man alone is conscious of God as the guide, ground and goal of the great scheme of the universe. The realisation of the affinity with God, the Ultimate Father, is the ideal of man. The ethics of the Meeteis is subsidiary to this goal. Morality is action to realise the highest perfection. Well-doing is the promotion of well being. This teleological ethics runs like a guiding thread through the social history of the Meeteis.

According to the Meeteis, human life is the most precious of all lives. An individual fails in his duty as man if he does not actualise his spiritual potentialities. He must live a life of reason and not of passion. The importance attached to the strict social and moral discipline is well asserted in the Leithak Leikhalon Puya when it prescribes the moral qualities of the man who should read the puya. The puya says that it should not be read by an evil man. An evil man is one who does not pay due respect to

his parents and takes little care of other members of the family. He does not listen to the advice of his superiors and disregards the views of wise men of the society. He shows disrespect to the king, has a high opinion about himself and does not hesitate to betray his friends and relatives. He has no respect for women. He steals, tells lies and hurts others. A good man respects his parents, honours the king and listens to the advice of wise men. He is humble and never hurts the sentiment of others. He never owns properties belonging to others. He takes simple food that would not intoxicate him. He is devoted to duty and deity. The puya says that it should be read by good men only.

The Wakoklon puya describes an ideal man as one who knows himself and his parents. The high regard of the Meeteis for their parents is expressed in the traditional saying 'Mother is heavier than the heavy Earth and Father is higher than the high Heaven'. Parents are looked upon as visible deities by whose grace an individual becomes devoted to the supreme Father of the universe. Just as the parents protect the children, so also God comes down on the earth to save mankind from evil temptations and passion.<sup>1</sup> The life of a man should be led under the very eyes of god. This suggests that no wrongdoer can escape punishment. The belief in the divine care to maintain cosmic order is the foundation of the social behaviour of the Meeteis.

The Meeteis have great respect for their ancestors and worship them. This is not due to any fear of the ghost. It is the social feeling which has prompted the people to trace their security and well-being to the guardian spirits of their ancestors. The Meetei house is regarded as the abode of gods. The most important of the house-

hold deities is Sanamahî who occupies the south-west corner of the house. The goddess Leimalel has her place in the centre by the north wall. Further, the hearth (Phuagga) is situated in the centre of the main room. It is evident that the Meetei life-style is determined by religious considerations. Prayers are to be offered to the deities. Rites are to be performed. Virtue is obedience to the law of God.

The socio-economic ideal of the Meeteis is 'wattaba padaba'. The literal meaning of this expression is 'to have neither shortage, nor excess of the requirements of life. If anybody has excess over his actual requirements, he is tempted to acquire wealth further and looks upon his fellow beings to be inferior to him. Equally the one who suffers from shortage of his requirements is tempted to do immoral activities for their acquisition. Thus the Meetei advocates the middle way between luxury and poverty. Like Buddhism, the Meetei religion is pragmatic in its preference for the middle course. The Meetei avoids the extreme views about the way of life. He advocates neither the life of sensual indulgence nor that of rigorous asceticism. In every prayer he asks God to make him Watta Padaba-to have no excess and shortage in his life's possession. This has got great socio-economic and moral impact on the life of the Meeteis. They believe in a deity called Lai Chakhetpi. This deity defeats human pride. Chakhetpi means that which scales down. The scaling down of human pride is the moral and social norm for the people. Pride ruins the human individual and his society. Justice rules over the course of things. It maintains the order of the society. Kangbalon Puya states that Justice was restored in the human society by the divine action of blowing of the flag fixed by the wrongdoer and upholding the one fixed by the right man.

Just as the Vedas speak of the Rta as having the utmost significance in the moral world, there is, in the Meetei Puyas, the firm belief in the Lainingshung Heiyi as the supreme moral guide in the life of the human beings in particular, and the whole course of the universe in general. For the Vedic Indians, "It is the law which pervades the whole world, which all gods and men must obey."<sup>1</sup> Dr. Radhakrishnan says, "Rta furnishes us with a standard of things. It is the satya or the truth of things. Disorder or An-Rta is falsehood, the opposite of truth. The good are those who follow the path of Rta, the true and the ordered. Ordered conduct is called a true vrata. Vratani are the ways of life of good men who follow the path of Rta. Consistency is the central feature of a good life. The good man of the Vedas does not alter his ways."<sup>2</sup> In the Khunai (society) of the Meeteis also as revealed in Nonglon Pathup Wachellon and Amam Nonglon, there is Lainingshung Heiyi that regulates and controls all things and beings in the universe. Even the gods are His offshoots. They work in fulfilment of the ways of the Lainingshung Heiyi. That which conforms to the course of the Lainingshung Heiyi, the Nong, the only one Reality, is the truth—the standard. That which stands against it and violates the course is wrong. All are due to this Lainingshung Heiyi, and all are for Him also.<sup>3</sup> It is very significant that at this early stage we should find such a unifying conception as that of law or order pervading all things, expressing itself in the natural order and in the religious life of man and tending to be associated with one supreme God. Thus morality is an expression of divine law, sin is opposition to that law. The sinner is one who is out of harmony with the spiritual domain which encompasses the world.

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1. Radhakrishnan, S. *Indian Philosophy*, Vol. I. p. 109

2. *Ibid*, pp. 109-110

3. cf *Akojam*, I., *Eeyek Salai*

Devotion to the deity and the firm belief in the law of morality as the ultimate ground of the cosmic order constitute the foundation of the systematic organization of individuals in the Meetei society. The main urge in a human being is to live the good life, the life of godliness, to live for and in God. And it was this primary urge which brought about the sense of social solidarity among the Meeteis. Strict social and moral discipline was observed by inflicting punishment on the wrongdoers. Punishments ranged from simple scolding and warning to beating, banishment and death according to the degree of crimes. Cases of assault and theft, cheating and cattle-lifting were punished by flogging in public places. Fining was, however, the commonest of all punishments. Adultery and seduction invited exemplary punishment. The hair of the offender was cut and his head was coloured and then he was exhibited in the public places. Intermarriage between persons belonging to the same yek was treated as an offence and the offenders were banished from the kingdom. Revolution against the royal authority and murder invited capital punishment. In many cases of violation of social and moral rules imprisonment was carried out as a punishment. Specified terms of imprisonment varied from one week to twelve years.<sup>1</sup>

In the Meetei society punishment was inflicted upon a criminal as a vindication of the authority of the moral law. The reformatory character of punishment is noticed in some cases. Women were not beaten. They were not executed. The aim of shaving the head and exposure in the public places was to reform the criminal. The Meeteis believed that a criminal might escape punishment from the human authority but God's punishment would fall upon him.

The social organization of the Meeteis was based on certain cultural norms which gave orientation to the various activities of its members. The Yek system was introduced

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1. Brown, R, *Statistical Account of Manipur*, pp. 92-93

to meet the needs of the time when different groups of the people had to live together in amity. The myth of cow<sup>1</sup> shows that the Meeteis regarded their yeks as different limbs of God. Atiya Sidaba appeared in the form of a dead bull in order to test his sons. The carcass of the dead bull was cut in to seven pieces and divided among the founders of the seven yeks. Hodson gives two versions as to which part refers to each yek. In one version, "the Angoms spring from the brain of the sage, the Luangs from between his eyes, the Khabananba from his eye, the Moirangs from his nostrill, the Chenglei from his nose, the Kumul from his liver, and the Ningthaja from his spleen." In other version, "the Ningthaja were born from his left eye, the Angom from his right eye, the Chenglei from his right ear, the Khabananba from his left ear, the Luang from his right nostril, the Kumul from his left nostril and the Moirang from his teeth."<sup>2</sup> Dr. Parratt gives another version in which<sup>3</sup> the parts were divided as follows.

Angom	the white neck
Ningthouja	the eye
Luwang	the head
Khuman	the front legs
Moirang	striped sections of the belly
Khaba	the face
Nganba	the breast" <sup>4</sup>

According to S.K. Chatterji, the myth of the cow finds its parallel in the Rg-Vedic hymn according to which the Brahmin emanated from the mouth of the primeval Being, the Kshatriya from his arms, the Vaisya from his thigh and the Sudra from his feet.<sup>4</sup> But while the Purusa Sukta refers

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1. See above p.

2. Hodson, T.C., *The Meitheis*, p. 100

3. Parratt, S.N., *The Religion of Manipur*, p. 35

4. Chatterji, S.K., 'Kirate-jana-Kriti : The Indo-Mongoloids, their contribution to the History and Culture of India,' *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal* 16(2), p. 225 f.

to the division of Hindu society into the four classes, the Meetei myth describes seven groups of people and their integration into one body and does not refer to any gradation. The myth shows the peaceful solution of the inter-group rivalry among the Meeteis.

Man would not have been different from other species of living creatures, big and small, had he not been endowed with adequate intelligence and spiritual qualities. He is aware of his place in the vast scheme of the universe and this makes him humble. He has obligation to each and everything and being around him. Social development consists in harmonious development of the constituent members of the society. Social good is an ethical end towards which all members of society direct their activities. In the Meetei society the king had the power and the authority to enforce order through laws. He was looked upon as a Deity incarnate. The royal family claimed descent from Pakhangba and the king was addressed as 'O Great God Pakhangba'. Wisdom and courage were believed to be embodied in the king. The ideal for the king was to become perfect even as Pakhangba, son of God was perfect. As the Chronicles write, "Lairen (=sovereign). your rightful dwelling is the palace land, chief of all the lands which are good in which cattle roam, as your ancestor the great Sovereign came like the spreading heat of the sun, so you, Lairen, spread your fame from beneath the shade of the royal canopy and made the last of the ranges of Hanching Mountains your settling place."<sup>1</sup>

The evolution of worship in the Meetei society brought about a class of persons specially qualified and charged with the care of the offices of religion. The priests and priestesses were called *maithas* and *maibis*. Hodson observes, "The heads

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1, *Ningthunrol Lambuba* pp. 9—10.



of the clans are priests, and assume charge of the ritual of the tribal worship, while the Raja, the head of the Ningthaja clan and the head of the whole confederacy, is the high priest of the country."<sup>1</sup> Mc Culloch mentions an earlier belief according to which the maibis "owe their institution to a princess who flourished hundreds of years ago ...

At present any woman who pretends to have had a 'call' from the deity or demon, may become a priestess. That she has had such call is evidenced by incoherent language and tremblings, as if possessed by the demon "<sup>2</sup> The maibi played a more important role in religious ceremonies than the maiba. When a man was possessed by a lai, he would wear the clothes of maibi. Traditional physicians and midwives were also called maibas and maibis but they did not dress in the distinctive white of the priestly class. A woman became a maibi either by being chosen at the Lai Haraoba <sup>3</sup> or by being possessed by a lai. The maibi was always selected by the lai when she was possessed. Usually the maibi was possessed by a male lai and the maiba was possessed by a female lai, but exceptions were also noticed. Maibis acted as mediums communicating with the dead. In cases of serious illness they called back the five souls and the shadow of the patient in order that he might recover. They performed various rites to appease evil spirits and acted as fortune tellers. Maibas and maibis were permitted to marry but they were subjected to ritual restriction. The married life of maibi was often complicated by her relationship with the lai who 'possessed' her <sup>4</sup>

1. Hodson, T.C., *op cit*, p. 109

2. Mc Culloch, W., : *An Account of the Valley of Munnipore and of the Hill Tribes, Selections from the Records of the Government of India, No. XXVIII*, p. 21

3. *see above p.*

4. Parratt, S.N., *op cit*, p. 95f

The main task of maibas and maibis was to perform different ceremonial rites for individual people, the king and the state. They were considered to have divine dispositions and knowledge of the one ultimate Being<sup>1</sup> While the Brahmin priests of the Hindu religion have hereditary tradition, the Meetei priests were neither hereditary nor chosen by the king. A Meetei interested in the secrets of creation received moral and spiritual instructions from the Maichou (the great maiba) for years together and on successful completion of the course he was recognised as a maiba. Maibas became Maichous by virtue of their service and knowledge. Some of the great Maichous of the past were considered to belong to the order of the deities. They assumed human forms to save people from calamities and guide them at the critical hour of the national history. Even the kings bowed their heads before them.

A woman became a maibi at any age, young or old. When a woman suffered from abnormal disposition, she was sent to a senior Maibi for determining whether she was under the possession of a lai. If she was found to be possessed by a lai, she became a maibi under the guidance of the senior. In cases of refusal of the family to hand over the woman to the maibi, prayers and offerings were made to the lai to set her free. Even after conversion of the Meeteis to Hinduism, the traditional religion is flourishing. Side by side with the Brahmins, there exist the maibas and the maibis of the old faith.

The ideal of Meetei ethics is God-realisation. A conduct is moral only as leading to this highest end. This ideal can be attained only if a man transcends his narrow individuality. All the Puyas emphatically assert that man is dust as well as deity. Within his mortal

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1. The word maiba or amaiba is derived from 'ama' which means 'one'.

frame there is the presence of Lainingahing Heiyi, the Supreme Being. By His light man is conscious and has intelligence to realise the divine essence within him. But when he is dragged down by his bodily sensations and feelings to a life of temptations and desires, his life becomes one of moral evil, unworthy of man. Ideal life is a God-centred life, not a selfish adventure. In knowing his true nature man knows God. The Meeteis were convinced that death was not the end of all things. After night, the day, after death, life. No special doctrine about life after death is noted in the Puyas.<sup>1</sup> They reveal human hope and faith rather than the deductions of logical thought. A belief in rebirth, however, prevailed among the Meeteis.<sup>2</sup> The faith in the survival of the soul exercised tremendous influence on the ethical life of the people. In the world to influence on the ethical life of the people: in the world to come the soul was rewarded or punished for the deeds done in the body.

A socio-ethical code of conduct has been prepared by Y. Budhichandra from a study of the different traditional myths and legends of the land.<sup>3</sup>

What a man should not do

(a) A man should not be sad, should not sit on broken stools, should not sleep immediately after sunset, should not have sexual relation with tender innocent girls by using his strength,

(b) he should not wear dirty cloths, should not do routine household duties at odd hours;

(c) He should not speak extravagant words, should not be tempted by passions like anger, pride, greed, envy

1. See above p.

2. See above p.

3. See Budhichandra, Y., *Imolru Ahongbig: Tungnafam*

etc., should not steal other's property, should not be unsatisfied with what he earns,

(d) he should not take impure and intoxicated food;

(e) he should not behave in a disorderly manner while dealing with others, should not be fickle in mind;

(f) he should not walk under creepers and behind the bars of cloth stand, should not slip away from home through unusual ways,

(g) he should not dishonour and abuse his wife without reasons, should not try to have illicit relation with other woman and act against the desire and wish of his honest and devoted wife.

#### **What a woman should not do**

(a) She should not speak sugar coated words concealing her own opinion, should not so exhibit her outward appearance as would tempt the passionate youths, should not be careless about making her inner mind pure;

(b) She should not use harsh words by showing red eyes, should not tell lies, should not deal with husband carelessly in high handed manner,

(c) She should not be a victim of passion like anger, greed, envy, pride etc., should not pretend to be in agreement with her husband while concealing her own opinion,

(d) She should not roam about carelessly from house to house speaking ill of others,

(e) She should not try to develop illicit relation with other man,

(f) She should not do her household duties carelessly e. g. brooming carelessly, taking meals without manners and scattering things over the premises without any proper care;

(g) She should not make her body unclean and should not use dirty cloths,

(h) She should not spend and eat up whatever she has without an eye to the future, should not conceal eatable things for her alone;

(i) She should not forget that she is part and parcel of her husband, should not develop careless dealings with her in-laws, should not speak ill of her husband and the family to others in the neighbourhood, should not abuse her sons and daughters and kick them in anger;

(j) She should not produce unnatural sounds while taking grains from the barn and while husking;

(k) She should not do her daily works at home without cleaning her body in the morning, should not enter the house wearing wet cloths, and also should not leave her wet cloths at unusual places ,

(l) She should not forget that the human body is a divine place, should not forget also the significance of the domestic deities and the daily prayers to be offered to the deities.

#### What a man should do

(a) A man should have a clean body, should take plain and simple food as would not intoxicate his life,

(b) he should have a tender heart for the poor and the weak, and a lion's heart against the cruel and the wicked;

(c) he should control his mind properly and subdue passions and desires;

(d) he should speak the truth, should have settled mind and determined habit ;

(e) he should know his duty well and perform it without shirking his responsibility :

(f) he should respect the views of the elders and consider his parents to be deities incarnate ,

(g) he should know his place in the society and should endeavour to reach his destination of life through the light of right knowledge of things ,

(h) he should aim at a peaceful domestic life with his wife, and plan the household affairs in consultation with his sincere and devoted wife ,

(i) he should try to know the great order of Time – its divisions into year, month, week and the full course of a day with its divisions into three spans – Mangang, Luwang and Khuman. In all the three times of the day he should pray to the Supreme Ultimate God, Tengbanba Mapu ;

(j) he should honour and respect people who are dedicated to the cause of mankind, and develop genuine love for his fellow beings,

(k) he should respect and honour authority—the king and the noblemen who are ruling over the people with abilities following the tradition of the ancient divine Pakhangba ;

(l) he should make daily prayer to the deities in his residence with deep knowledge of their significance.

#### **What a woman should do**

An ideal woman thinks her husband to be the deity and serves him accordingly. She helps her husband in controlling his mind by sweet words and advice. She obeys her husband and gives up what he does not like. With her simple and pure mind she gives sound decision unalloyed by passions and temptations. She always thinks for the well being of her husband and her kids praying to God in all the three times of the day. She respects the elder and never crosses over the shadow of her husband and the respected elders. She has no ill will towards anybody, her relatives and friends in the neighbourhood. She never borrows fire from the neighbours at odd times.

She is ready to face the hard situation of life with courage and determination enduring the abuses and orders of her husband. She has a clean mind and clean body with proper dresses. She never lends out household articles to other persons at odd times. She plans the domestic affairs economically with an eye to the future. She never allows anybody to take anything from the house by their own hands. Whatever thing she finds as the day's earning she places before Imoinu Ahong Achaobi, <sup>1</sup> the deity for good moral behaviour, wealth and prosperity. She goes out from home after due prayer and worship to the household deities. When she comes back, she prays to the deities. In the family she assumes the role of the supreme female deity Leimalei Sidabi. In the khunai of the Meeteis such women are regarded as ideal in character. Humbleness, modesty, nobility and amiableness are important qualities of a Meetei woman. The Meeteis believe that the deity Imoinu Ahong Achaobi rests in those homes of man and woman who strictly observe the above norms of social moral behaviour liked by her. She blessed them with Nungai Yaifaba (well-being and prosperity), Watta Padaba (having neither shortage nor excess), Tekta Kaidaba (unaffected by troubles of life) and Punshi Nungshangba (long life) which are the basic ends of life in the human world. The Meetei lives an ordinary simple life in the manner desired by Imoinu Ahongbi and prays to God daily and tries to realise the deep significance of life—its origin and destiny. He tries to realise his inner self—the indwelling spirit in him. In so trying to realise his own inner self he realises the Supreme Self—Yaibirel Sidaba. Thus the Highest Good or the Summum Bonum of life which is the realisation of the Supreme Self is achieved. This is the ideal life in the tradition of the Meeteis.

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1. Corresponding to the goddess Lakshmi of the Hindus, this Meetei goddess dwells behind the domestic hearth in the centre of the house and offers life and prosperity to her devotees.

The Lai Haraoba festival is the mirror of the Meeteetse culture. Some of the lyrics sung traditionally in Hoi Laoba and Wakon Laoba of the festival have deep moral significance. Below we give some of the instances :

**Sapal Leiri Leikhongda**

**Leisu Ningthure, Kongyangau Ningthire'.**

(Sapal=Sa, the body and Pal, the wall—the fence; Leiri=the line of tongue—a limb of the body; Leikhongda=at the source of the tongue, Leisu=the tongue also, Ningthure=becomes beautiful, kongyangau=the bamboo also, here bamboo means Wa which represents Wakhal, the thought, Ningthire=becomes beautiful).

The meaning of the lyric is that the immortal element, the Thawai, within its fence the human body, enjoys the utterance of divine names and glory by his tongue as prompted by thought. It is out of the unity of thought and language that one can realise the Supreme and appreciate His glory.

**'Machin Ngeida Luthumba Lubal Segaire'.**

(Machin Ngeida=at the earliest beginning, Luthumba=fixing of fishing traps made of bamboo, Lubal=the mouth of the fishing trap, Segaire=was torn).

The meaning of the lyric is that the human being is lured by passions, desires and temptations at the beginning, and is at the end spoiled by them.

**'Wang Khudeng Maipakpi Laija Thanna Hapchillo  
Charei Pop Pop Sudoko.**

(Wang=a kind of wood, Khudeng=tray; Maipakpi=broad faced; Laija=water; Thanna=to the brim; Hapchillo=fill; Charei=cloth, Pop Pop=sound of washing cloth, Sudoko=let wash).

The meaning of the lyric is that high thoughts should be preserved well in the head and they should wash away evil ones.



**Wakono Wakono Chingdagı Wakonna Tamda Tage  
Mahaıba, Tamdagı Wakonna Chingda Tage Mahaıba,  
Wakonı Fase Lifase Wakon Tanoi Noi.**

(Wakon=*a meaningful imaginary bird. Here it represents the storehouse of thought; Chingdagı=from the hill, Tamda=in the plain; Tage Mahaıba=wish to go, Fase Lifase=let us catch hold of, Tanoi Noi=becomes well grown).*

The lyric allegorically says that the human head is the store house of sublime thoughts and ideas whereas the human heart is the store house of passions and thoughts. The head is compared to the storehouse located in the hill while the heart is compared to the store house in the plain. Thought lies in the head, the hill, while the Pukning (mind) is in the heart. The thought that is in the high head is tempted by the lower ideas of love and passion. This is what has been compared to 'Chingdagı Wakonna Tamda Tage Mahaıba'. But the higher thought that is in the head also makes the lower ideas purified. This has been referred to as 'Tamdagı Wakonna Chingda Tage Mahaıba'. If the precious wealth, the high thought, dominates the lower ideas of the heart by eliminating the passions, desires and love, the higher thought becomes all the more brightened and greater. This has been referred to as 'Wakonna Fase Lifase, Wakon Tanoi Noi'.

**'Ningthouyengbi Chaganu Numit Yungganı'**

(Ningthouyengbi=*normally a tasteful vegetable plant, but here it represents passions and desires, Chaganu=do not take; Numit=Sun; Yungganı=will not fall).*

The meaning of this line is that the bright sun, i.e., the ideal man who does not become a victim of the evil temptations of passion and desire, never falls. As he has not been shrouded by evil clouds the bright light of his life will not lose its intensity.

**'Da Kempok Chaganu Namu Chomganı'**

(Sa=the body, Kompek=normally a water plant, but here it represents the mind that is all the more tempted by evil designs of passions, desires and love etc., Ghaganu=do not take, Namu=the moral integrity of a man, Chom-gani=will be high)

The lyric suggests that the moral integrity of an individual will remain high if he is not influenced by the bodily pleasures, passions and desires.

These are some of the instances of the high moral directives sung as lyrics ordinarily in Hoi Laoba at the beginning and Wakon Laoba at the end of Laiharaoba festival of the day. These lines speak of high moral values. Lai Haraoba is thus an institution that imparts moral teachings to the people of the land

It is evident from the above that every individual must control his senses. This will strengthen character, purify the mind and deepen insight. The divinity that is in man is in a potential or dormant state. We should not mistake the potential for the actual. What is potential must be developed, what is dormant must be awakened. And this needs man's endeavour to bring about an equanimity of thought (wakbal) and mind (pukning). The ideal of equanimity is the cornerstone on which the edifice of ethical life is built. The songs sung in the Lai Haraoba festival advocate a harmonious relation between the lower sensuous feelings and the higher rational thought. This has to be attained not by surrendering reason to passion, but by purification of passions. Desire enlightened by reflective thought culminates in right conduct.

The sensuous life is blind and unconscious of man's divine destiny. Our bodily existence is limited to the sense-bound universe. But according to the Meetei, within the mortal frame of man there dwells the Supreme, Lainingshing Heiyi. By virtue of His presence man lives.

By His light man is conscious. The microcosm and the macrocosm, the individual and universal aspects of reality are built on the same basic pattern. Our knowledge of reality depends upon the extent of our knowledge of ourselves. Man has intelligence to realise God within him. But he goes astray when he is dragged down by the bodily sensations and desires. When he is led by noble thoughts, his passions are controlled and the presence of Laining-shing Heiyi is revealed to him.

There are three stages in the ethical development of man. First, there is the animal in man which prompts him to seek pleasure in the senses. Some men live in the senses only and are no better than animals. They are called by the names of Sarois. Then there is a higher class of man. They have the rational sense of discrimination between right and wrong and do not flow with current of desires. And then there are persons who have realised God in and through His manifestations. Their minds no longer go astray; they always follow the right path. These men have become divine, though they belong to the earth. They are revered as Pakhangba (the one who knows his father, i.e., the ultimate source). They are also called Ching-U which signifies the immediate feeling of consciousness—the intuitive knowledge of the Supreme Reality. In the Meetei society such lives are the ideals, the guiding lights of mankind.

The ethics of the Meetei is not life-negating. It affirms the meaningfulness of human existence. Moral ideals are not private dreams. They are rooted in the cosmic scheme determined by God. Man is both soul and body.<sup>1</sup> Morality consists in the continued attempt to resist the solicitations of our blind ephemeral impulses and shape our lives in accordance with the enduring ideals of the spirit. The law of morality is an invitation to become perfect, even as Pakhangba is perfect.

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1. *Ningthourol Lambuba*, p. 191

## CHAPTER VIII HINDUISM & THE MEETEI RELIGION

Hinduism is of comparatively recent introduction in Manipur. It became the dominant religion of the land during the reign of Pamheiba <sup>1</sup> ( 1709-1748 ) As Hodson observes, "To the royal will of Pamheiba, the monarch in whose reign the fortunes of the State reached their zenith, Hinduism owes its present position as the official religion of the State. At first the decrees of the king received but little obedience, and the opposition to the change centred mainly round the numerous members of the royal family who were supported, not unnaturally, by the maibas, the priests of the older religion. Religious dissent was treated with the same ruthless severity as was meted out to political opponents, and wholesale banishments and execution drove the people into acceptance of the tenets of Hinduism."<sup>2</sup> There is, however, evidence of early Hindu influence on the people of the land. Some Brahmins came from the west and settled here during the reign of Kyamba in the 15th century but they had no significant impact on the life of the Meeteis in absence of any support from the king. Brahmin migration continued presumably with the permission of the kings. These settlers were allotted clan (Sages) names and through intermarriage with Meetei women were absorbed into the Meetei community.<sup>3</sup>

During the reign of Charai-Rongba ( 1697-1709 ) some Vaishnava saints came to this land. The king and his family were initiated into the new faith.<sup>4</sup> According to the chronicle, the king and some of his nobles took the

1. Pamheiba was also known as Garib-Niwaz, a persian name indicating the influence of Islam at that time.

2. Hodson, T. C, *The Meiteis*, p. 95

3. Bamon Kunthoklon, pp 14

4. Singh, K B, *Manipuri Vaishnavism : A Sociological Interpretation*, *Sociological Bulletin* 12 (2), pp 66-67 See also Singh, R. K, *Jhalajit, A short History of Manipur*, p.115

sacred thread after a day's fasting.<sup>1</sup> Conversion of the king to a foreign religion was possible only because there had already been at least some influence of Vaishnavism in court circles. Kennedy thinks that Vaishnavism of the Chaitanya sect was introduced in Manipur as early as the 17th century.<sup>2</sup> Charai Rongba never attempted to impose the new religion upon the people as a whole. At his initiative a Vishnu temple was constructed. A temple of the goddess Kali was also built. At the same time the king paid respects to the old faith and temples were erected in honour of the lais of the traditional religion.<sup>3</sup>

The process of forcible Hinduization was carried out by Pamheiba ( Garib Niwaz ), son of Charai Rongba. He was initiated into Vaishnavism by Guru Gopal Das. He punished those who violated Hindu dietary laws. Consumers of cow meat and of any other meat were beaten and it was forbidden to keep pig, and hens in the housing areas. Cremation was made the customary method of disposal of the dead. A temple of Lord Krishna was built. A large tank was excavated and images of Krishna and Kali were placed on the bank as part of the consecration ceremonials. The proselytizing zeal of Pamheiba displaced the traditional gods. He destroyed several temples of Umanglais.<sup>4</sup>

In the later part of Pamheiba's reign, a Brahmin, one Santidas, came to Manipur from Sylhet and began to preach Vaishnavism of the school of Ramanand.<sup>5</sup>

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1. Chettharol Kumbaba, p. 56

2. Kennedy, M T, *The Chaitanya Movement. A Study of the Vaishnavism of Bengal*, p 73

3. Chettharol Kumbaba, pp. 59-60

4. *Ibid*, pp. 71-75

5. In contrast to the Vaishnava sects of Nimbarka and Chaitanya, the Ramanandi sect prescribed the worship of Ram and Sita instead of Krishna and Radha. See Bhandarkar, R.G., *Vaishnavism, Saivism and Minor Religious Systems*, P 62ff.

According to some Manipuri writers, the king was initiated by Santidas into the Ramanandi sect. After the initiation he severely persecuted not only the followers of the traditional religion but also those who belonged to the other sect of Vaishnavism. Through the instigation of Santidas the king collected all the puyas and ancestral records and burnt them at Kangla. By a royal decree the books and records in Meetei scripts were banned. Maichous who were in possession of the ancient texts went to remote areas of the hills and the valley to keep their treasure concealed<sup>1</sup>

Dr Parratt observes that there is little support for the view that Pamheiba transferred allegiance from one Vaishnava sect to another. The chronicle speaks of "the renewal of the sacred thread by the king" and does not suggest "the adoption of a new sect". Moreover "it is difficult to suppose that the king could persecute a sect into which he himself had been initiated"<sup>2</sup>. Under his rule Vaishnavism was established as the state religion. Each yek was identified with a particular Hindu gotra<sup>3</sup>. The Hindu calendar was introduced. Old Meetei rituals were adapted to Hindu usage. Pamheiba himself worshipped Rama and Lakshmi after his victory in Tippera. He was a great devotee of Hanuman, the monkey god and ally of Rama and constructed a temple in his honour. The chronicle however refers to the persecution of the Ramanandis "In the month of Inga (May-June), on the 2nd day, Monday, all the followers of Ramanandi were

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1. Singh, R. K. *Sanahal, Satjal*, pp 89-90. See also Sharma, F. *Atombapu, Meitei Kirtan*, p 115 and Singh, R.K. *Jhalajit, A Short History of Manipur*, p. 136
  2. Parratt, S N, *The Religion of Manipur*, pp. 148-9
  3. Chatterji, S. K., 'Purana Apocrypha: A Manipuri — Purana'. In Bender, E. (Ed), 'Indological Studies in Honour of W. Norman Brown', p. 39

punished : all the Brahmins were sent back to the land of the Mayangs; all the princes, brothers of the king, were deposed from their positions, most ( of their followers ) were sent to prison."<sup>1</sup> The incident occurred in 1736. It is evident that the persecution was not simply on religious grounds but had political overtones. Perhaps the Ramanandis conspired to overthrow the king and invited royal wrath. As a result this sect ceased to be a significant factor in Manipur. The king was not absolutely hostile to the traditional religion, for even after taking the sacred thread he appointed Brahmins to worship somelais,<sup>2</sup> perhaps his aim was to curb the power of the Maibas and Maibis. He "abdicated in favour of his son Chit Sai in 1748 A.D., and retired to Ramnagar, very possibly as a Sannyasin."<sup>3</sup> In the opinion of some writers<sup>4</sup> Pamheiba was treacherously murdered by his son Chit Sai, but Dr Parratt doubts the veracity of the reported patricide<sup>5</sup>

Chit Sai tried to reverse the religious policy of his father but he was soon banished from the land by his brother. The dreary tale of treason, rebellion and intrigue continued. It was during the reign of Chingthang Khomba ( known as Bhagyachandra ) (1763-98) that Hinduism was consolidated. Despite the ravages of successive Burmese invasions he confirmed Vaishnavism of the School of Chaitanya as the state religion without neglecting indigenous gods. Through his efforts Hindu festivals and rites were generally accepted. The most significant contribution of Bhagyachandra was the introduction of Ras Lila. It was based on the

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1. *Chetiharol Kumbaba*, p.84

2. *Ibid*, 8.72

3. *Parratt, S.N., op cit., p. 152*

4. *Allen, B.C., Naga Hills and Manipur, Part II, p. 14;*

*Mc Culloch, W., An account of the Valley of Munnipore and of the Hill Tribes. Selections from the Records of the Government of India, No. XXVIII, p. 8*

5. *Parratt, S.N., op cit., p. 150f*

dances in the Lal Haraoba. Thus a traditional ritual was transformed into a classical Indian dance.

While Vaishnavism was of comparatively recent introduction, the worship of Siva, Durga (Kali) and Ganesha was very ancient. This is evident from the Phayeng Copper Plates<sup>1</sup> discovered by W. Yumjao Singh in 1935. These plates contain the injunctions of king Khongtekcha (763-784) encouraging the worship of Siva, Durga and Ganesh. The presence of Sanskrit words in the king's proclamation suggests the influence of Hinduism on the people of the land at an early date. Dr. Parratt is sceptical about the datation of these plates and their value and holds, "that they originate from a period when Saivism was at a low ebb and in need of a boost perhaps having been eclipsed by Vaishnavism—and was lacking in royal support."<sup>2</sup> But the presence of Saivism long before the advent of Vaishnavism in Manipur cannot be denied. As E. Nilakanta Singh says, "The pre-historic period of Manipur proves the wide prevalence of Shaivism and Tantric cults. On many a hill top there remains still Shiva lingas, whom people on special occasions, worship and pray to."<sup>3</sup> As to whether Saivism was brought to this land by any particular person at a particular time there is little information. Perhaps Siva cult has been prevailing in this land from a very early period and has never stooped against the traditional religion of the Meiteis. Like Siva and Parvati in the Hindu pantheon Nongpok Ningthou and Panthoiba have set ideals for mankind. The legend

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1. These copper plates were collected from the Loi village of Phayeng. They were written in archaic Manipuri and were translated with illuminating comments by Yumjao Singh in his 'Report on Archaeological Studies in Manipur' Bulletin No. 1. Unfortunately the plates are now missing.

2. Parratt, S. N., *op. cit.*, p. 109.

3. Singh, E. Nilakanta, "Lal Haraoba" *Marg*, 14 (4) p. 30.



says that the king Nongpok Ningthou met Panthoibi as she was helping her father at jhuming.<sup>1</sup> No words were exchanged but the two fell in love. But Panthoibi was married off to another person against her will. She left the house in search of Nongpok Ningthou. He also left his palace in search of Panthoibi. The two met at Kangla. Since then Kangla has been associated with the coronation of the Meetei kings. The Nongmajing mountain where the capital of Nongpok Ningthou was established is a place of pilgrimage. This episode of the divine couple is always danced out in the Lai Haraoba Festival.<sup>2</sup> This couple is identified with Siva and Durga. There is a phallic stone in a flat place just below the summit of the Nongmajing mountain. Pilgrims perform the sacred bath in the Chinggoi stream and then climbed the mountain. This stream is as sacred to the Meeteis as the Ganges is to the Hindus.

The co-existence of Hinduism and the traditional religion was uneasy for some time, but gradually there began the process of assimilation and the result was the Hinduisation of the Meetei religion. Hinduism is a medley of beliefs and rites. With ease it has absorbed the customs and ideas of people with whom it has come into contact. It has accepted almost as a part of its creed that men differ considerably in temperament, training and level of aspiration. Synthesis and compromise rather than criticism and elimination have been the guiding principle of Hindu teachers and commentators. As a result of this attitude Hinduism has become a mosaic of almost all the types and stages of religious aspiration and endeavour.

On many fundamental points there are striking similarities between Hinduism and the indigenous religion of the Meeteis. Both claim to have grown out of a divine tradition.

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1. *I Kind of terrace cultivation.*

2. *See Panthoibi Khongul*

The Vedas form the foundation of the Hindu religion. It is believed that they are not of human compositions. The Rsis of the Vedas are not the authors, but only the seers of the Mantras. The religion of the Meeteis also has no human author. There were, however, persons of divine disposition who enlightened people about the Lais and their function. The Meetei theory of creation as represented in the Puyas bears resemblance to the doctrine as depicted in the Nasadiya Hymn <sup>1</sup> Both the theories hold that the determinate world pre-supposes the Indeterminate Reality as the ground and goal. For the Meeteis, the Supreme Lord, Tengbanba Mapu, in his manifestation as Blank Boundless Expanse (Atingkok) pervaded by Darkness (Amamba) is the source of all the deities and the heaven and the earth. The Meetei seers were not mere primitive men wondering at the forces of nature. They were intellectual personages who could discover unity as the foundation of multiplicity. The Meetei religion is not anthropomorphic polytheism. Lais are regarded as mere manifestations of the Supreme Deity. When a particular lai is worshipped, he is not worshipped in his individual capacity but merely as the manifestation of the Supreme God who is called by various names. The lais are worshipped, yet not the lais but the Supreme God, Tengbanba Mapu, is praised through them.

As in Hinduism, so also in the Meetei religion, man is the cream of creation. He is higher than all other things and beings of the world. The cosmic order is the settled will of God, the law of morality and justice as well. As in the Vedic conception of Rta, so in the Meetei conception of Lainingshing Heiyi we notice a development from the material to the spiritual.<sup>2</sup> The Supreme Lord determine the course to be followed by all in the universe.

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1. See above p.

2 See above p.

The divine law maintains the scheme of creation. As Radhakrishnan observes, "Where law is, disorder and injustice are only provisional and partial. The triumph of the wicked is not absolute. The shipwreck of the good need not cause despair."<sup>1</sup>

Like Hinduism, the traditional religion of the Meeteis believes in the plurality of deities. But the tendency at systematisation has its logical culmination in monotheism. The primitive conception of Umanglais is reconciled with the idea of Unity represented in Tengbanba Mapu, the Ultimate ground of all things and beings.<sup>2</sup> The difference between Hinduism and the Meetei religion in this context cannot be overlooked. In the former case, "there has been a gradual development of the philosophical thought from the Mantras and the Brahmanas through the Aranyakas to the Upanisads. It is said that we can notice a transition from the naturalistic and anthropomorphic polytheism through transcendent monotheism to immanent monism in the pre-Upanisadic philosophy. The personified forces of nature first changed into real gods and these later on, became mere forms of one personal and transcendental God, the 'Custodian of the Cosmic and Moral Order', who Himself, later on, passed into the immanent Purusa. The Upanisads developed this Purusa into Brahman or Atman which is both immanent and transcendent."<sup>3</sup> There is no such development of the idea of God in the traditional religion of the Meeteis. Their religious philosophy is often lost in the amorphous mass of animistic ideas. Their religion has all the features of primitive faith. It is animistic in so far as it believes that external things are possessed of a life akin to man's and that spirits are present everywhere in nature. Traces of worship addressed

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1. Radhakrishna, S, *Indian Philosophy*, Vol. 1, p. 109

2. See above p.

3. Sharma, Chandradhar, *Indian Philosophy*, pp. 3-4

to concrete things are found among the peoples of classical antiquity.<sup>1</sup> The Meetei term 'Umang Lai' (forest or wood deity) points to tree-reverence as an important feature of primitive faith. This does not mean that all the Meetei deities are associated with trees. The term now applies to any traditional deity even in absence of any kind of association with trees.

The significance of animism is that man endows the religious object with a soul like his own. The Meetei concept of Umanglai bears striking resemblance to the Burmese concept of Nat.<sup>2</sup> Nats are associated with trees and regarded as guardians of particular areas, just as Umanglais are regarded as guardians of directions. While people are afraid of Nats and try to appease them by offering food, Umanglais produce the feeling of awe in which fear, wonder and reverence are mingled. A characteristic feature of the Meetei religion is that primitive beliefs and high philosophical concepts exist side by side. All lais are regarded as the shifting forms of the one and real divinity Tengbanba mapu. Leithak Leikhalon Puya emphatically asserts that Tengbanba Mapu is the all-embracing whole within which there is Atingkok (Blank Boundless Expanse). Within Atingkok there is Amamba (Infinite Darkness), within Amamba there is the primal Air, within the Air, there is the cloud, within the cloud there is Water, within water there is Earth.<sup>3</sup> As the background of all things and beings Tengbanba Mapu is transcendent of the universe, nevertheless he is immanent in all things and beings which are his manifestations. This monistic music of the Meetei religion makes it closer to Hindu thought which believes that Brahman is the Ultimate Reality from which all flows out and to which all returns.

1 See Hastings, J (ed), *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, Vol. 12

2 See Spire, M E, *Burmese Supernaturalism*.

3. *Leithak Leikhalon*, pp 11-12

The most important of the household deities is Sanamahī. Literally, 'Sanamahī' means 'liquid gold'. As such it represents fire. Like the Vedic people the early Meeteis worshipped fire. In the Rg-Veda "Matarisvan, like Prometheus, is supposed to have brought fire back from the sky and entrusted it to the keeping of the Bhrgus."<sup>1</sup> According to the Meetei tradition, Poiraiton carried with his men a tray of earth filled with rice husks, in which a fire was kept burning. He wandered through the hills and mountains before entering the valley of Manipur in search of a place free from sickness and death.<sup>2</sup> Since then in every Meetei house, in the centre of the main room the hearth is placed. Though there are no elaborate rites as found in connection with the Vedic hearths, the Meeteis consider the domestic fire to be of great religious significance. Outwardly Sanamahī is different from Phungga (fire place), but its inner meaning has led some writers to regard him as a sun god.<sup>3</sup> The worship of the sun is natural to the human mind. It is an essential part of the Hindu religion. Sanamahī, like the sun, is the author of all light and life in the world. While Sanamahī is the indwelling spirit in every being, the unmanifested potential essence, Pakhangba is the manifest aspect of the Supreme Lord,<sup>4</sup> the ruling deity of living beings, the Prajāpati in Hindu conception.

Both the Meeteis and the Hindus believe that man is potentially divine. The ideal of life is to realise God.

1. Radhakrishnan, S., *Indian Philosophy*, Vol 1, p 82
2. Singh, R K Jhalajit, *A Short History of Manipur*, p. 35  
See also Poiraiton Khunthok and the Chronicle Ningthourol Lambuba.
3. Singh, K B, *Traces of Pre-Hinduism in Meetei Society*. *Folklore* 5, p 203. See also Singh, W. Y., *Religious Belief in Ancient Manipur*, p 66
4. See above p.

within man. God-realisation is self-realisation. The Meeteis do not support the materialistic view that man is just the body which is annihilated at death. They have a strong conviction of the continuity of life and maintain that there is something which survives bodily death. From the Chronicle we learn of the primitive Meetei belief that man is both soul and body.<sup>1</sup> All the puyas agree in holding that the Supreme God is seated within man in his different aspects. According to them man has five souls (thawais) and a shadow. Death means dissociation of the shadow from body.<sup>2</sup> These immaterial essences which constitute the core of man's being abide for ever. The heart of religion is that man belongs to an order beyond the visible and the temporal. The belief of the Meeteis that man's soul is of divine origin and is akin to the spirit of God points to man's capacity to transcend limitations set by the body. The transfiguration to which man aspires is the very law of his own being.

Sri Atombapu Sharma has attempted to establish close connection between the Vedic religion and the traditional faith of the Meeteis. Though his writings about the Indo-Aryan origin of the Meetei beliefs and practices appear to writers like Parratt to be "too much like special pleading to be convincing",<sup>3</sup> it is worthwhile to have a careful look into them to get an idea about the affinity between the two faiths. The figure (No IV) is called Pallandabi by the Meeteis. It is not known from whom they learnt this figure. It has been a tradition of the Meeteis to draw it on some special occasions. It is found drawn at the door as a measure to protect domestic animals against death and diseases. It was an old practice followed in ancient Europe. It was believed that the figure belonged to the Pythagorean school.

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1. *Ningthourol Lambuba*, p. 191

2. *See above* p. 109

3. *Parratt, S.N*; *p.cit*, p. 2

But later it has been discovered to be of Indian origin. The same figure was found drawn on the royal gate of the king of Mysore<sup>1</sup>. Another similar figure (no 2) is also believed to have come from the East. This figure has been in use among the Meeteis since ancient time in their important rituals. It is regarded as the sacred curve of God Pakhangba in his snake manifestation. They call it Tillikoktong Yaibirel Sidaba<sup>2</sup>.

The game of polo (Kangjei) is of Meetei origin. Two teams consisting of seven players<sup>3</sup> each play on horseback each with a stick (Kangchei). The ball used is made of bamboo root and is large and light. According to Atombapu Sharma, this game is considered sacred by the Meeteis because the ball (kangdrum) represents the sun who symbolises God. The game is played on horseback. The horse represents the fast moving character of things. In order to signify the fast-moving sun, horses are used in the game. The sun is considered to be carried by the horse. This refers, says Sharma, to a Vedic tradition in which the sun is considered to be riding on a chariot driven by horses. The seven players represent the seven days which the Meeteis call 'namit' meaning the sun. Thus through this play the people remember the ancient Vedic tradition.<sup>4</sup>

Atombapu Sharma thinks that the word 'sanamah' is derived from 'Syen' and means Garuda who serves the Lord Visnu in preserving the universe.<sup>5</sup> He goes to the extent of saying that the religion of the ancient Meeteis was Krsna

1. Sharma, *Atombapu, Meitei Kirtan*, p. 161

2. *Akoijam, I, Eeyek Saloi*, p. 1

3. "In the more important games as played in Manipur, seven men on either side is considered the correct number, but in ordinary games any number may play", Brown, R. *Statistical Account of Manipur*, p. 79.

4. Sharma, *Atombapu, op. cit.*, pp. 162—4

5. *Ibid* pp. 111, 115—7

Yajurveda So the Hindu religion as introduced by the Brahmin immigrants in the later age is not anything new to the Meetei people. The Vedic tradition has been prevailing in Manipur since ancient times<sup>1</sup>. Although Sharma's attempt to establish an Aryan pedigree for the Meeteis may not be justified by facts of history, he has drawn interesting parallels between the Meetei and the Vedic culture.

S.K. Chatterji has pointed out the partial Hindu parallel to the legend of Pakhangba. On being told by his father that he would be king if he could return first after circuiting the world, he circumambulated his father's throne seven times and bowed to him. But his brother Sanamahí started off from that place and returned to see Pakhangba on the throne. In the Hindu legend Ganesa circumambulated his mother parvatí while his brother Karttikeya undertook to go round the world on a peacock to settle the argument as to who was greater<sup>2</sup>.

The affinity between Hinduism and the traditional religion of the Meeteis has facilitated the establishment of Vaishnavism as the religion of Manipur through absorption of the Meetei Lais in the Hindu pantheon. It is a fact that India has assimilated in course of its long history people of every race, colour and culture. In Manipur that process of assimilation has inevitably led to a tolerance of the local customs and beliefs by recognising them as part of Hinduism. Radhakrishnan observes, 'Hinduism is not based on any racial factor. It is an inheritance of thought and aspiration to which every race in India has made its distinctive contribution'. While the Vedas represent the religion of the classes, the masses continued to worship their traditional deities, Yaksas and Nagas. Behind the facade of Vedic orthodoxy and its tendency to abstract symbolism, an

1. *Ibid.*, pp 161, 177

2. Chatterji, 'Kirata-jana-kritu', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal*, 16 (2), p. 225f



extensive and deep-rooted system of popular beliefs and cults and a decided tendency to anthropomorphic presentation prevailed. The Vedic religion, however, absorbed, embodied and preserved the types and rituals of older cults. Instead of destroying them it adapted them to its own requirements."<sup>1</sup>

It is a fact that there was some opposition to the process of Hinduization as carried out by the king Pamheiba. But this opposition had political overtones. Shakespear attributes this opposition in part to the king's forcible imposition of Vaishnavism and in part to the strict dietary laws advocated by the Brahmins<sup>2</sup>. Parratt says, "It seems likely that the king did not attempt to destroy traditional religion entirely, for this would have been an impossible task. There is evidence that he tried to bring some at least of the old gods under the cultic control of the Brahmins, perhaps with the object of reducing the importance of the maibas and maibis while at the same time avoiding the direct destruction of the greater lai"<sup>3</sup>.

There is no real conflict between the Meetei Lai and Hindu gods. There are, however, certain points on which these two religions disagree and these are dogmas and rituals which are more or less derived from local traditions and mythologies, bearing as they do the inevitable stamp of local forms and names. But they are the non-essentials of religion. Essentially there is unity between the two faiths. Their fundamental principle is the absolute oneness of Divinity. As the Rg-Veda declares, "That which exists is one, the learned call it by various name"<sup>4</sup>. That universal Being call it Brahman or Tengbanba Mapu, is manifesting itself in

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1. Radhakrishnan, S., *Eastern Religions and Western Thought* pp. 306-308
  2. Shakespear, J, '*The Religion of Manipur*', *Folk Lore*, 24, p 413f
  3. Parratt, S.N, *The Religion of Manipur*, p. 157
  4. *Rg Veda* I 164 46.

infinite varieties of names and forms. It is the essence of our being, the foundation of our existence and the basis of our intelligence and consciousness. The whole phenomenal universe is nothing but manifestation of all the powers the absolute Being.

The affinity between the traditional religion of the Meeteis and Hinduism has brought about a synthesis of the two faiths in Manipur. The Meeteis have not given up their culture and tradition. They have found their place within the Sanatana dharma of the Vedas. The integration of the two religious traditions has been summed up by the erudite scholar, S K. Chatterji thus, "Manipur Hinduism gradually became a synthesis of the old Meitei religion with its gods and goddesses and myths, its own legends and traditions, its social customs and usages, and its priest and ceremonials and of Brahmanical Hinduism with its special worship of Radha and Krishna." <sup>1</sup>

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1. Chatterji, S K., *Kirata—Jana-Jana-kriti*, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal* 16 (2), p. 288

## CHAPTER IX

### CONCLUSION

Religion is a spiritual process. It is man's faith in a power beyond himself whereby he seeks to satisfy emotional needs and gain stability in life in the face of manifold forces which threaten him. In its developed form it presents a reflective view of the world as a whole. Manipur supplies us with an example of the beginning and growth of a religious philosophy. The traditional religion of the Meeteis is an immeasurable advance on the crude animism of the primitive culture. It reveals to us a stage of polytheism where the deities retain traces of their original connection with the objects of nature. But there is a movement from the many to the One. All the gods and goddesses are conceived to be modes or manifestations of one Ultimate Being. The multiplicity of Laibis is resolved into the unity of Lengbanba Mapu. Monotheism is attained in Manipur, not by a mechanical identification of the different local gods but by seeing through the veil of the manifold the spiritual unity which underlies it.

The early Meetei thinkers were not unmindful of the philosophical problems of the origin and nature of the world. Their religious consciousness was lifted into the region of speculative thinking. The whole world is pictured as emanating from one being of incomparable vastness and immensity, pervaded by darkness. This principle called Atingkok-Amamba is an eternal manifestation of the Supreme Lord. The world is not a purposeless phantasm, but is just the efflux from God, manifestation of the substance of his being. Such a conception lays emphasis on the principle of continuity. There is no break in the transition of the world-ground into its consequent. God is the necessary

source of the world. The created world, though it is distinguished from God, has no being apart from God and is sustained by His will. Man is created by God in His own image. He has a mortal body and an immortal soul. The body is constituted by different elements manifested in the universe. So long as there is equilibrium of the elements, there is no illness or death. But man is not merely a body. The body without thawais and a shadow is inert matter. God dwells within man. The very macrocosm is in the microcosm. Our consciousness, our breathing and our activities are all part of the cosmic process. Everything has come from one infinite source. The life-force represented by thawais has come into existence from that source, and from the same source have come all the elements. Thus the whole universe is nothing but the expression or manifestation of all the powers that exist potentially in the absolute Being.

The cult of ancestors has left its mark on the whole religious life of the Meeteis. Some awe of the ghosts of the departed prevails among the people and has left its impress on many burial customs. But the deliberate worship of ancestors is something higher than this superstitious terror. Each yek has a set of traditions as has a deity peculiarly its own. Yek deities are generally believed to have had human existence at some point in the past. The religious importance of worship of ancestors and tribal gods lies in the social motive which works behind it. It lends sanction to tribal loyalty and mutual obligation. It establishes an essential kinship between man and his god and realises a fellowship between all the members of the tribe.

We should not represent the ancient Meeteis as full-blown arm-chair philosophers engaged in metaphysical speculation about the reality as a whole and man's place and function in it. Their response to the environment was

reflective as well as emotional. For this reason in the traditional religion of the Meeteis there is intermingling of crude beliefs, blind superstitions and religious faith of a higher order. This is evident from the different rites as practised in the Meetei society. A multitude of usages has developed out of the magical view of things. The world becomes crowded with gods and goblins. Diseases of men and catastrophes of the world are traced to angry spirits. The employment of spells, incantations and curses, the practices of divination and taboo, the uses of charms—all these require specially qualified persons, *maibas* and *maibis*. As a consequence, the traditional religion of the Meeteis has become an amalgam of sublime pantheism and mechanical sacerdotalism.

The Meetei religion is not sectarian. It is not a mere structure of creeds but is a living force that brings out all the manifold experiences into a system. The sectarian religion brings divisions among the upholders of different faiths. But the Meetei religion transcends our narrow individuality and small interests. The word 'Meetei' signifies mankind. Thus the religion which the Meeteis follow is the religion of man which is universal in outlook and is not built around any particular personality.

When Vaishnavism became the state religion of Manipur, there was in the beginning, resistance to change on the part of the devotees of the traditional cults. The resistance was more political than doctrinal. The spread of Vaishnavism was slow. It was achieved only by a compromise with the ancient faith. Traditional *Lais* were brought into the Hindu pantheon. Hindu deities were absorbed into the Meetei culture. As a consequence of this process of assimilation Manipur exhibits today a remarkable synthesis of the indigenous faith of the Meeteis and Chaitanyaite Vaishnavism. No conflict is felt between the two. All the important *lais*

are worshipped according to prescriptions drawn from both the traditions. The Hindu festival of Ras Lila is based on the traditional dances of the Lai Haraoba. It is the genius of the Meeteis that has raised this stylized dance to the domain of a very high artistic expression and has thus produced one of the beautiful traditional schools of religious dancing in the world.

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## Glossary of Meetei Terms

ahanba	first and foremost
amamba	darkness
anam-athou	ritual for sanctification
anganba	light
apokpa	ancestor or progenitor
chak	the four periods in which the great time was divided.
chakthak	the food offered for propitiation
chahi	year
chei	stick
ching	hill
ching-u	immediate awareness
Ec	blood relation
Eeratpa	offering sacrifices and worship to the deities
hanjaba	court official
hao	hill man
heibi	medlar
heikru	small edible fruit
hilel	the most valuable element
hingchabi	witch, vampire
hiri	thread
hitongba	crew leaders of the boat race
hiyang	the fast moving boat
hongba	to dedicate
ihai fu	an earthen pot, a cultic object
inkhol	compound (residential premises)
ishai fu	a pot used for carrying water, a cultic object
jagoi	dance
ka	the allotted room or area

<b>kabok</b>	puffed rice
<b>kai</b>	coffin
<b>kangchei</b>	polo stick
<b>kangdrum</b>	polo ball made of bamboo root
<b>kangla/kanglei</b>	the area of old palace, the place which bried first
<b>kayat</b>	limbs, parts
<b>khambr</b>	fire
<b>khayom</b>	a cultic packet (for offering to the deities) consisting of rice, langthrei flowers, and egg within layers of banana leaves
<b>khayum</b>	the movement of the sun from the nor- theast to the south-east
<b>khoimom</b>	female deity
<b>khoyum</b>	male deity
<b>khun</b>	village
<b>khunai</b>	society
<b>khunthok</b>	migration
<b>khununglon</b>	the language used by common people
<b>khurumba</b>	to bow down, worship
<b>konyai</b>	gold and silver coins (pieces)
<b>kum</b>	year
<b>kumkhai</b>	gradation of the year as good or bad
<b>kumtam</b>	determining the year by rain
<b>lai</b>	god, deity
<b>la cha/laija</b>	water
<b>laining</b>	worship
<b>laininghal</b>	senior devotee or worshipper of god
<b>lainingshing</b>	remembrance of god
<b>lainingthou</b>	god-king (applied to both gods and kings)
<b>lai-nurah</b>	divine girls
<b>laipham</b>	an area sacred to the lai,
<b>laipung</b>	the mount for the lai, the courtyard of the lai
<b>laipungthou</b>	divine youths or lords



la'rembi, lairema	goddess, female lai
laisang	shrine
lalu,	forced labour system
lang	net, obstacles
lei	earth
leichin	cloud
leikha	the lowest layer of the earth
leikhul	the hole in the earth
leithak	above the earth
leiröl	layers of the earth/species of flowers
leima	the queen, the lady
leimalei	the supreme lady
leithong	the gate of the earth
leiyom	the cultic packet of flowers
maiba	priest
maibi	priestess
maichou	the great maiba who knows the secret of the reality
maikei-ngakpa	gods who guard the directions
malang	air
malem	mother earth
mamei	tail, and
mangang	sunrise (one of the yeks of the Meeteis)
mapu	the lord who owns everything
maru	the supreme root
matam	time
mayang	non Manipuri of Indian origin
mi	shadow, image
mirel	the supreme shadow or image
mee	the human being
meetam nga	fish representing man
mei	fire
ningthou	king
nong	ultimate reality
nongohup haram	immigrants from the west
songpok haram	immigrants from the east

nonglaoba	lit, shouting for rain, cultic shouting of abuse
nongthou	heaven
numit	sun
pa	father
pafal	the curves in coiling form of the snake
Pana	Taoroinei Pakhangba
Pathup	division of the people into four groups for administrative purposes
Pena	secret folds
Phambal	stringed fiddle
Phung-ga	throne, seat
Pi	the hearth in the middle of the house
Piba	mother
Pol	eldest or chief male of the sagei
Polpi	cage
Pu	one who is in a cage, used of soul
Punshi	forefather
Puya	life
Sagei	written records of traditions kept by forefather
Sageilai	clan, group bearing the same family name
Sagol Kangchei	lai (male and female) of the sagei
Salai	polo
Saroi	yek (Primary constituent Unit of the Meeteis)
Sci	evil spirits
taren	bel-metal coin
tampak	plant, cedrela toona
tarang	valley
thawai	indefinite and infinite state
tha	soul, life-essence
umanglai	moon
wakok	lit. forest deity, used of lai in wider sense
	leading words.

yai	light
yaibɪ	soul
yaibɪlɛl	supreme self
yauθong	the gate of yai beyond which there is darkness
yek	the seven divisions of the Meetei society, roughly equivalent to tribes
yu	rice beer
yum	house
yumnak	sageɪ (Surname of the clan)

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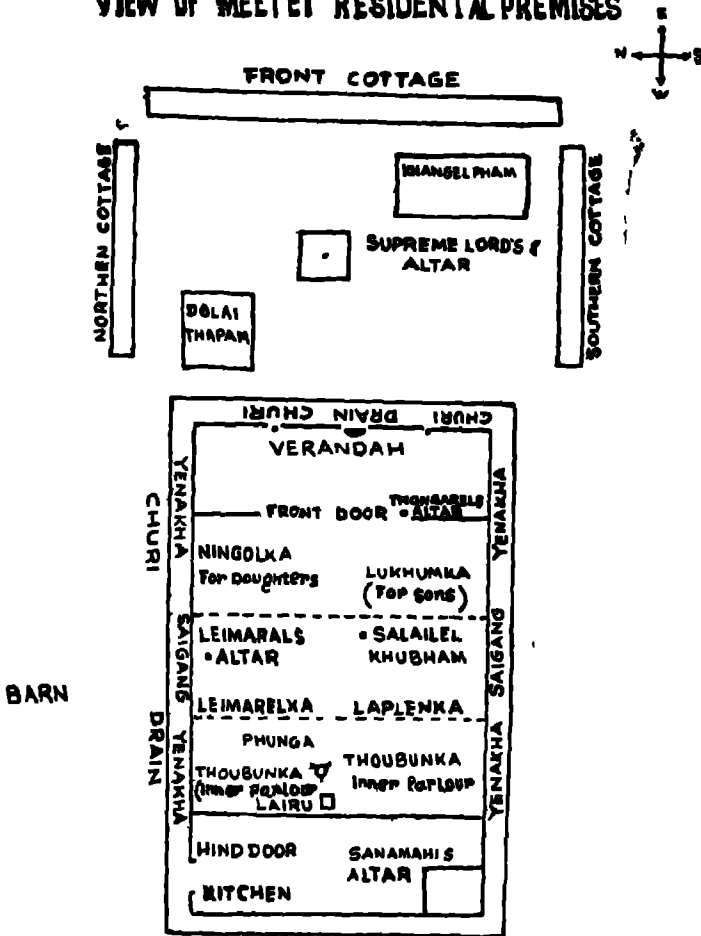
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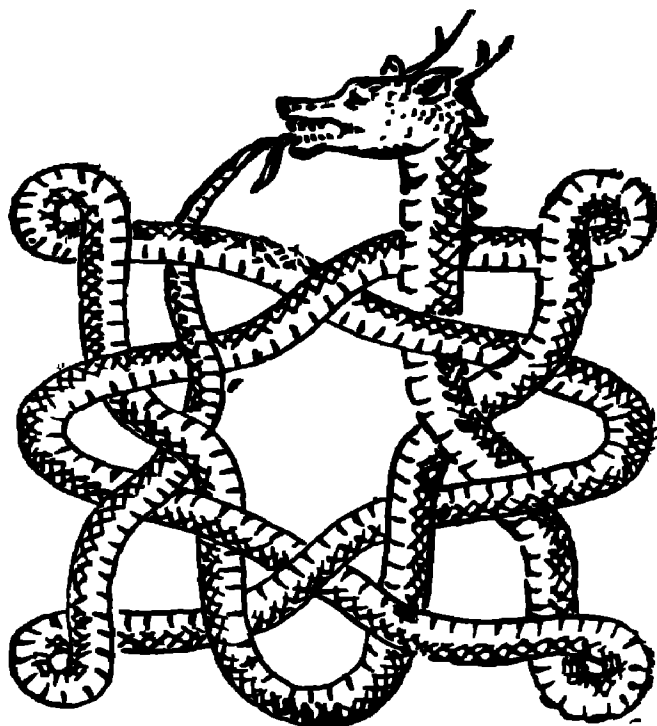
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# APPENDIX

## VIEW OF MEËTEI RESIDENTIAL PREMISES



**PAFAL**

**Fig 1**  
**KANGLEI PUBA PAKHANGBA**  
**MEETEI NATIONAL EMBLEM**

# PAFALS

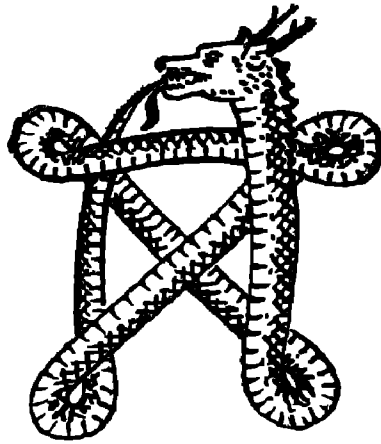


Fig. 2

**TILLIKOK SITAPA PAKHANGDA**  
(Immortal Essence)

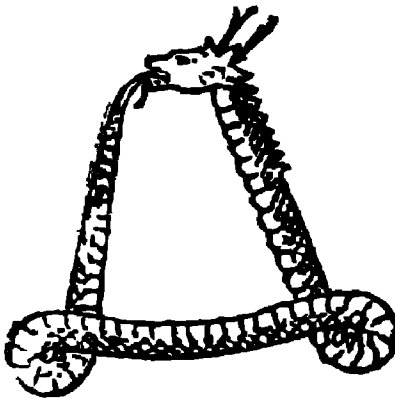


Fig. 3

**GENERAL COILING FORM**

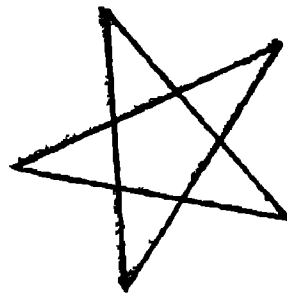


Fig. 4

**PALLANDABI**  
Drawing used in rituals